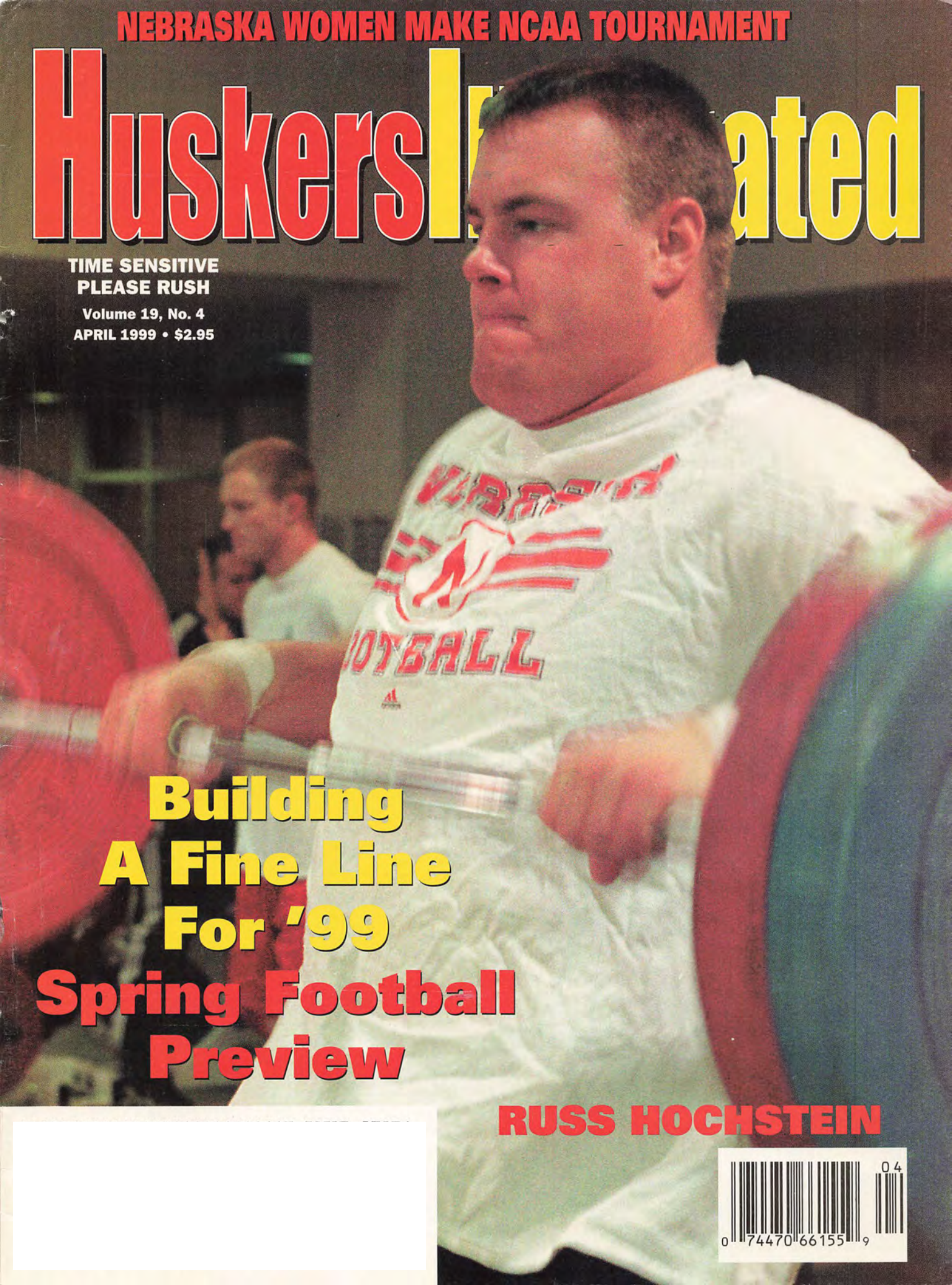
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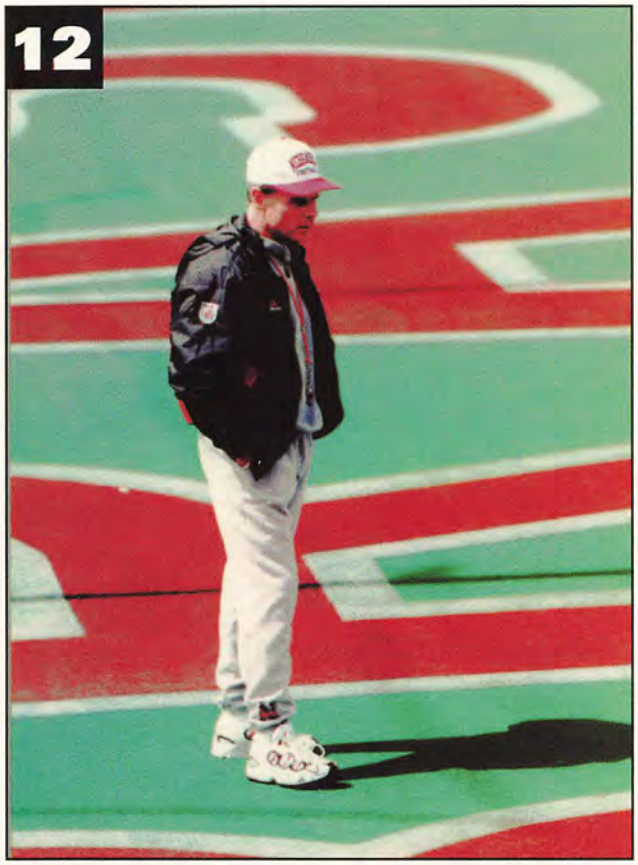
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N ALUMNI

Huskers Illustrated

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12 Spring Football Preview

With several players already questionable, a primary concern for Coach Frank Solich entering spring practice is the team's health. *By Mike Babcock*

28 Dance, Dance, Dance

Coach Paul Sanderford's Nebraska women's team makes its second consecutive appearance in the NCAA Basketball Tournament. Meanwhile, the men's team had to settle for the NIT.

On The Cover

Russ Hochstein and the Nebraska offensive linemen got an early start with 7 a.m. workouts in the weight room. *Photo by Scott Bruhn*

NEXT ISSUE

Should mail around April 27, 1999.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Time Will Tell

While residing in Denver over the past 25 years, I was always interested in the Huskers' recruiting endeavors.

I've kept an article to remind me that the recruiting gurus are like the weather forecasters — unreliable where you want to be sure.



Nebraska quietly recruits, for the most part, outstanding athletes (not necessarily the blue-chippers) and scholars with ambition. I think the Huskers could be putting together another run for the national championship.

John Zier
Fresno, Calif.

The item Zier included is titled "How the 1983 Cornhuskers were built." That team, with its high-powered offense dubbed "The Scoring Explosion," was undefeated until a 31-30 loss to Miami in the Orange Bowl. According to the article, the starting 22 players included six walkons and 14 native Nebraskans. There were 15 walkons among the top 44 players. — Editor



Eric Crouch (third from left in back) played host to 10 Kansas boys.

Crouch Impresses Boys

Thank you for the pictures you sent of Eric Crouch. We had an excellent time with Eric. He was excellent with the boys. He talked to them as if he'd known them for a long time.

James Daugherty
Principal
Wellsville Elementary School,
Wellsville, Kan.

The youngsters visited Lincoln Feb. 19 and toured the capitol, in addition to meeting Crouch. Huskers Illustrated provided photos for the boys to get autographed. — Editor

More Husker Honors?

Thank you for the nice article about our awards dinner honoring Tom Osborne and Joel Makovicka.

I am sure there will be more Cornhuskers honored. In fact, Johnny Rodgers is on the ballot this year. This year's class will be announced at the Hall of Fame in South Bend, Ind., on April 9.

Rick Walls
Director of Public Relations,
The National Football Foundation
and College Hall of Fame Inc.,
Morristown, N.J.

Osborne's was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in December. Fullback Makovicka was among 17 student-athletes who received $18,000 postgraduate scholarships from the National Football Foundation. — Editor

Nine More Wins

Thank you for the great magazine. I live in Mississippi, and if not for your publication, I am quite certain that it would be nearly impossible to keep up with the Huskers.

Now, on to a more serious topic. The Husker Football program went through a tough season this past year to say the least. However, I have been disappointed by the response of some of the fans. While many have dwelled on the streaks that ended I prefer to find the silver lining and point out that we recorded our 30th consecutive nine-win season. To me, that has been the most impressive streak of all anyway. These people who criticize (Coach Frank) Solich are the same ones who almost caused us to lose (Tom) Osborne to Colorado back in the 70s.

To all the true Husker fans out there, I just want to remind you that we have to ignore the complainers and continue the strong show of support that has earned us the label of the best fans in America. These armchair quarterbacks are the same ones you have to ignore when the stock market goes down. They are always buying high and selling low, and when it comes to our team, they are no different, always on the bandwagon when things go well and off when they don't.

Remember, Osborne went 9-3-1 in his first season. For those of you with extremely short memories, I will remind you that that is the same number of wins we had this year.

Wade Williams
Mississippi Husker Forever

Got Something To Say?

Please send your comments and questions to: Letters, 3210 NW 3rd St., Lincoln, Neb. 68521. You can also fax them to us at (402) 474-5132. We reserve the right to edit the letters for clarity, content and length. For those with electronic mail abilities, **Hleditor@aol.com.**

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EDITOR, GENERAL MANAGER
Brian Hill

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Mike Babcock

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Mark Derowitsch, James Hale, Steve Sipple, Curt McKeever, Bill Doleman, Todd Henrichs, Nebraska Sports Information Office

CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS
Scott Bruhn, Doug DeVoe, Jon Waller, Ryan Soderlin, Nebraska Sports Information Office

SPORTS MARKETING & ADVERTISING DIRECTOR
Jeff Tuder
For Advertising Information Call:
(402) 423-3405

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Customer Service
1-800-524-9527
Monday - Friday: 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.
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HI Online
http://www.superhusker.com

E-Mail Addresses
Editor: Hleditor@aol.com
Advertising/marketing: jtuder@navix.net

Fast Start

Ken Harvey got off to a fast start for the Nebraska baseball team.

The junior from Los Angeles went 7-for-9 with three home runs in a double-header sweep of Louisiana Tech at Rustin, La., in mid-February. The double-header sweep was the Cornhuskers' first on the road since April of 1994.

Harvey and junior shortstop Brandt Vlieger hit back-to-back home runs in the second and fourth innings of the 16-3 opener, and Harvey hit a grand slam during an 8-run fifth inning of the 14-8 second game. Harvey then went 5-for-8 in losses to Lamar University the next two days and became only the second Cornhusker position player to be named Big 12 "Player of the Week."

In addition to a .706 batting average and three home runs, Harvey scored nine runs, drove in seven runs and had a slugging percentage of 1.294 in the four games.

Harvey is draft-eligible this season, and playing professionally is "my ultimate goal, of course," he said.

"But I'm here to get an education, get a degree. So that's my first priority.

"I don't really try to think about that (being drafted) too much. I basically just want to win. Nebraska's
all about winning. I want to be able to win a championship, like any other program around here.

"That's my first goal. It's not about me getting drafted at all. It's just about us winning."



Junior Ken Harvey's fast start earned him Big 12 "Player of the Week" honors.

Harvey also got off to a fast start last season, hitting .458 with five home runs in the first 13 games. He did not hit a home run in the final 15 games, however, and finished with seven.

"Kenny Harvey is real streaky at the plate," said coach Dave Van Horn.

Even so, he led the Cornhuskers in hitting with a .373 average. Going into this season, his career batting average of .379 ranked fifth all-time at Nebraska, prompting Van Horn to note in the media guide: "When he is on, he is about as good as any hitter you can find around the country."

Despite his size — 6-foot-2, 250 pounds — Harvey is an exceptional athlete, setting the team record for points in the performance index. "He ran a 6.8 (seconds) 60 in the off-season," Van Horn said.

"Actually, it was a little faster, but I still don't believe it so I won't quote it. But he's a good athlete."

Harvey also is an outstanding first baseman. "He can field," said Van Horn.

"You know, he's our No. 1 defensive guy over there. He's outstanding defensively."

Harvey played first base for the Kenai Peninsula Oilers in the Alaskan summer league, hitting .320 with a wooden bat, and he had a solid fall in preparation for his third season at Nebraska.

He has set aside thoughts of the late-season power slump of a year ago.

"I think last year I kind of got off to a good start," he said. But when things didn't go well for the team, he tried to shoulder more of the offensive burden than he probably should have.

"I just felt like I was trying to do too much," he said prior to this season.

"I think that kind of was a negative aspect of last season. I'm just trying to put that behind me and look forward to this year, go with a different approach. Hopefully, things will turn out differently."

Obviously, Harvey figures prominently in Van Horn's plans for his second season as coach at Nebraska. "If we could get a big year out of him, that would be a major plus," Van Horn said.

Van Horn has made that clear. "Definitely," said Harvey.

"Coach Van Horn has told me that and what he expects out of me."

Harvey is trying to maintain a proper perspective, not try to do too much. "I want to not put so much pressure on myself, just come out and play every day, try to play hard, to the best of my ability, let the game take care of itself. I know I have the ability, that God blessed me to play this game.

"I just want to go out there and have fun, let everything take care of itself."

Fun would be advancing to the Big 12 Tournament, and earning an NCAA Tournament bid for the first time since 1980. "Hopefully, we'll get in a regional this year and turn a few heads," Harvey said. ■



John Cook was an assistant at Nebraska for three years.

Cook returns to Nebraska

The hiring of Wisconsin head coach John Cook as associate head volleyball coach led to speculation that Coach Terry Pettit planned to resign within the next year or two.

Pettit, 51, said he can understand why some people might think Cook's return signals the end of his coaching tenure, but that's not the case.

"I'm not at the stage of life where I want to go fishing and play golf all the time," Pettit told the Lincoln Journal Star.

The hiring of Cook, who was an assistant under Pettit for three seasons from 1988-91, was effective March 1. He replaces 10-year assistant Cathy Noth, who announced her resignation Jan. 24.

Cook, 42, has served as the head coach of the University of Wisconsin since 1992, posting a record of 161-73. As head coach of the Badgers, Cook led UW within one match of the NCAA final four the past two seasons, including a five-game loss to the Huskers in the NCAA Pacific Regional Championships in December at the Nebraska Coliseum.

Cook is getting a big raise to change jobs. According to published reports, he will earn an annual base salary of $90,000 at Nebraska, compared to $67,926 per year as head coach at Wisconsin. ■

QUICK HITS

What's Happening In Nebraska Football?

NEW COLORADO COACH LOOKING FOR RIVALRY

Here we go again. After replacing Rick Neuheisel as head football coach at Colorado, Gary Barnett has resurrected the designation of Nebraska as the Buffaloes' No. 1 rival.

Barnett was an assistant at Colorado when then-head coach Bill McCartney first designated the Nebraska game as the focal point of the Buffaloes' season.

"The 'former' Nebraska rivalry will be important to us," Barnett told the Omaha World-Herald. "When I was here, that game was a rivalry, and I never lost sight of that rivalry.

"I realize coming home means not losing to Nebraska. The last three years I was here, we didn't. So I want to do my part in the return to dominance of Colorado football."

Barnett's final three seasons at Colorado were 1989, 1990 and 1991, when the teams tied at Boulder. Barnett left to become the head coach at Northwestern, where he spent seven seasons.

CHRISTO CONTINUES FOOTBALL CAREER WITH LIGHTNING

Nebraska will be well-represented on Lincoln's newly formed Indoor Football League team the Lightning. The 21-player roster includes former Cornhusker football players Monte Christo, Jeff Ogard, Dwayne Harris, Brian Nunns and Rex Eberspacher as well as Willie Hibler, who was a sprinter on the Nebraska track team. Former Cornhusker Mark Traynowicz will be an assistant coach.

The Lightning begins its 12-game schedule on April 2.

"I thought my football was done after the Holiday Bowl, but this is a chance to play some more, throw a lot more and have a good time," Christo told the Lincoln Journal Star.

EX-HUSKER GOALIE JOINS BAYLOR STAFF

Former Husker soccer goalkeeper Rebecca Hornbacher has been named a full-time assistant coach for the Baylor soccer team, after serving as a graduate assistant at the Waco, Texas, school last season. Hornbacher earned third-team All-America recognition at Nebraska in 1996.

RIMINGTON GETS HIS HARDWARE, AT LAST

Cornhusker football All-American Dave Rimington received an Outland Trophy at the Outland Trophy Award Dinner in Omaha in mid-January.

Rimington won the Outland Trophy in back-to-back seasons (1981-82), but the Football Writers Association of America, which sponsors the award, presented plaques to winners at the time. Now, with co-sponsorship from the Downtown Rotary Club of Omaha, those who received plaques will be given trophies. One player will be awarded a trophy each year. Rimington was the first.

"That's really a cool idea," Rimington told the Omaha World-Herald. "My wife said she was going to call someone and try to buy a trophy for me. When she heard about this, she got excited."

Rimington, an Omaha native, works for the Boomer Esiason Foundation in New York City.

Former Cornhuskers Larry Jacobson (1971), Rich Glover (1972) and Dean Steinkuhler (1983) are among the other Outland Trophy winners who never actually received a trophy.

FORMER NEBRASKA BASEBALL COACH IN RED SOX ORGANIZATION

Former Nebraska baseball coach John Sanders is working in the Boston Red Sox organization. Sanders was hired in December to direct the Red Sox rookie-league program.

COME ON OUT; THE WEATHER'S FINE

Nebraska has a pair of non-conference games against Cal-Poly scheduled for March 23-24 at Buck Beltzer Stadium. So how did Cornhusker coach Dave Van Horn accomplish that?

"I told them the weather was great in March," he said with a laugh.

"No, to be honest, they wanted to come. We played them in Hawaii and enjoyed being around their coaches. I mentioned we wanted to bring some teams on spring break in in the future."

Cal-Poly coach Ritch Price "said, 'Hey, I might give you a call or call me,' " said Van Horn. "Well, he called me and said, 'We're thinking about going to Oklahoma State, can you give us a guarantee?' We worked it out. I told him March was ify, but the weather was OK. I didn't lie too much to him.

"Hopefully, the weather will be good. They wanted to get out of town." ■

After Painful Ending, Huskers Miss The Dance

Women make NCAA Tournament; men settle for NIT



Brian HILL

I'LL ADMIT IT. I took the bait.

Nebraska was red hot. They had won eight of their last nine at press time and looked like a cinch to make it to the Big Dance for the second straight year.

A victory over Iowa State made it nine out of 10, and I felt pretty good about what I had written in our March magazine.

Many of you now know the rest of the story. The Huskers lost three straight and went 2-4 in their last six games, including 1-1 in the Big 12 Tournament.

In two short weeks, Nebraska went from being a sure thing to being on the infamous bubble.

On March 7, that bubble burst.

Actually, it burst two days earlier, when Kansas demolished the worn-out looking Huskers 77-53 in the quarterfinals of the conference tournament. Or maybe it was two weeks earlier in Lubbock, Texas, when Rayford Young drove the length of the floor to score with 1.9 seconds remaining, after the Huskers looked to have a victory in hand.

Nebraska had its chances to seal the deal, but I still say they should have made the tournament.

The Huskers won two out of three against Big 12 Tournament champion Kansas (the Jayhawk blowout in the tournament must have negated that), they split with Missouri, and they crushed Oklahoma 96-81 on the road. Those three teams are dancing, as are Texas and Oklahoma State, which beat Nebraska in the only meetings. The Huskers also defeated Creighton, which qualified as the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament champion.

Nebraska settled for the NIT.

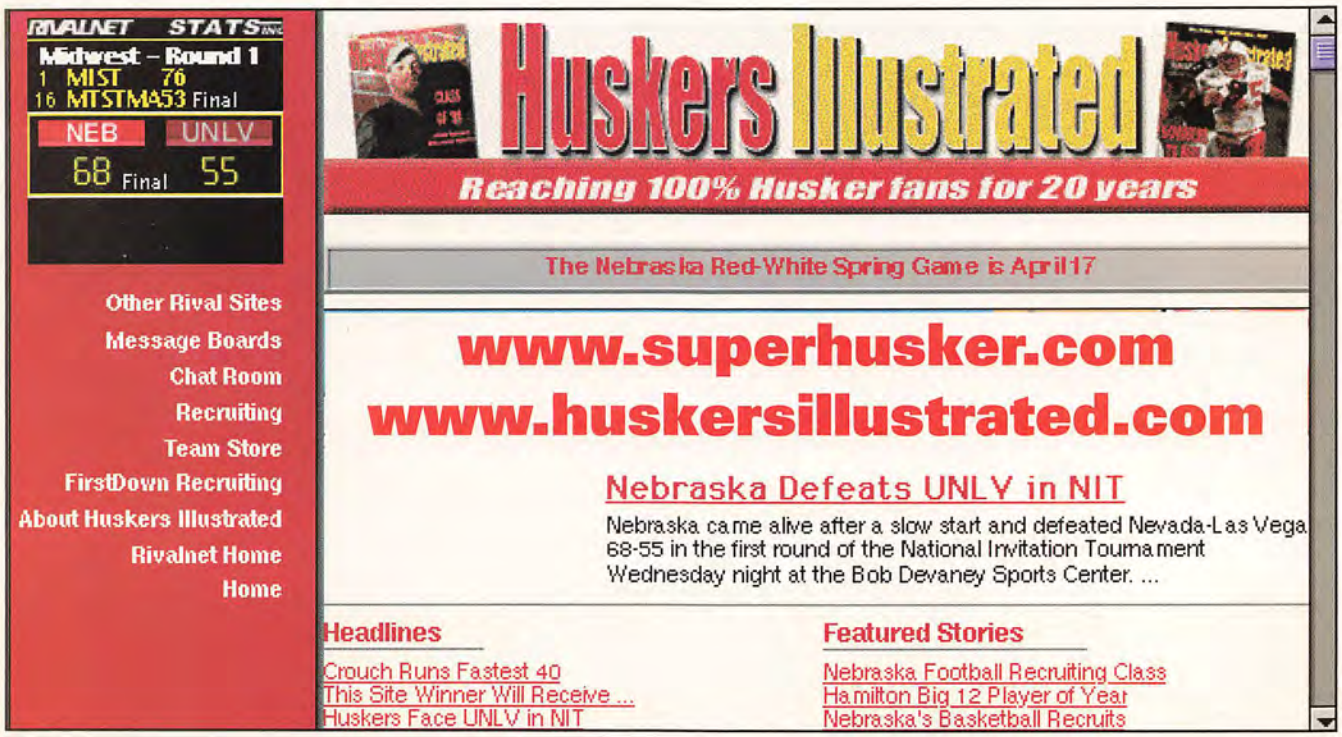
Huskers Illustrated will take a look back at the seasons of the Nebraska men's and women's teams in the May edition. Coach Paul Sanderford's women made the Big Dance for the second straight season.

The next edition will also include coverage of the April 17 Spring Game. Yes, another (spring) football season is upon us.

You'll find preview stories on spring football and a spring roster in this edition. There's also plenty of basketball coverage and features on baseball, softball and track and field.

By the way, if you're looking for a Husker fix between magazines, check out the Huskers Illustrated web site at www.superhusker.com (you can also find it at www.huskersillustrated.com). You'll find information, stories, scores, message boards and many other features.

The image below gives you a glimpse. ■



Welcome Back Jeff Perino

Quarterback gets waiver from NCAA to return from medical exempt status



Mike BABCOCK

JEFF PERINO was forgotten. But not gone.

He has served as an undergraduate assistant for the Nebraska football team since being granted medical exempt status in the fall of 1997. He has been ineligible to practice or play. But he has retained the scholarship he was given as a member of the 1995 recruiting class.

Perino was one of two quarterbacks in that class. The other, Frankie London, has moved to wingback, of course, and is recovering from a broken leg suffered late last season.

After two seasons on the sideline, Perino will rejoin the team this spring. And if all goes well, he could help the Cornhuskers in the fall. "(He) sure can," coach Frank Solich said recently.

"We felt coming out of high school he was an excellent quarterback, and in the short period of time he operated at the quarterback spot here, he showed very good potential."

Perino's problem wasn't lack of ability. It was a knee injury that limited him to playing in four games his senior year in high school in Durango, Colo. Even so, he earned prep All-America recognition and was recruited by Arizona State, Stanford and Washington as well as Nebraska.

An outstanding student, he also drew interest from some Ivy League schools.

The 6-foot-2 Perino, who now weighs 225 pounds, was an outstanding passer, completing 66-of-110 for 890 yards and seven touchdowns in the four games as a senior.

He also was an all-state punter for two seasons.

He redshirted his first season at Nebraska, then played well in the spring, finishing in a tie for second on the depth chart with Matt Turman, behind Scott Frost.

Perino, whose right knee was scoped following the 1996 Fiesta Bowl game, appeared to be on his way to a successful college career. He played sparingly in seven games in 1996, rushing seven times for 51 yards and attempting two passes, neither of which was complete.

Another knee surgery, however, ended his career — or so it seemed.

Prior to the 1997 season, Perino was placed on the Cornhuskers' medical-exempt list.

The rules are, when athletes go on the list, their injuries are career ending. They keep their scholarships. But the scholarships don't count against the team's NCAA maximum of 85.

Clearly, medical exempt status benefits athletes.

In rare instances, athletes with medical-exempt scholarships recover sufficiently from their injuries to compete again. So, it appears, is the situation with Perino, who decided after a year and a half of rehabilitation to try again. The problem then was regaining his eligibility.

And if he were to regain his eligibility, he would need a waiver from the NCAA so that Nebraska wouldn't have to count him against its scholarship totals for the 1997 and 1998 seasons.

The rule for players coming off medical exempt status is applied retroactively, which wouldn't have been a problem if the Cornhuskers hadn't been at the 85-scholarship maximum both seasons.

Without the waiver, Nebraska would have been in violation and would have had to self-report to the NCAA, according to Al Papik, compliance coordinator/football operations.

Depending on what the NCAA decided, Perino was considering a transfer to Montana, an NCAA Division I-AA school where he would have been eligible immediately. The Cornhuskers would have been in violation of the 85 limit for the last two seasons even if he had transferred.



Jeff Perino played sparingly in seven games in 1996.

The point is moot, however. At the end of February, the NCAA responded to Perino's eligibility request and the scholarship waiver for the last two seasons. Assuming he passed a pre-spring physical, which seemed fairly certain, he will be playing quarterback again this spring.

His return is evidence that the system works to the benefit of athletes, sometimes. And sometimes it doesn't. At the same time Perino learned he would be allowed to return, the NCAA turned down Cornhusker wingback Shevin Wiggins' request for an additional season of eligibility.

Wiggins was a member of Perino's recruiting class, after having to sit out a year following graduation from Manatee High School in Palmetto, Fla., for academic reasons.

Wiggins, who was listed as a sophomore when he arrived, redshirted his first season at Nebraska, then played three seasons. He had hoped to be granted a fifth year — to play four.

His situation was similar to that of outside linebacker Eric Johnson, except for the redshirt. Johnson will be able to return as a senior in eligibility next season. Wiggins will not.

If things go well in the spring, Perino could petition the NCAA for another season of eligibility, according to Papik. Such a petition couldn't be filed until next fall, however.

For the time being, Perino will be a senior in eligibility, and, with Bobby Newcombe sidelined, he'll join Eric Crouch as the only healthy scholarship quarterbacks in the spring.

"The fact that he has a chance, possibly, to play, that he feels very good about it and that he's able to be back on the field would certainly be a plus for us," Solich said before the NCAA responded.

Now, it's welcome back Perino. ■

Mike Babcock *can be reached at mdb@inetnebr.com or P.O. Box 6782, Lincoln, NE 68506.*

Jayhawks To Blame For Big 12's Image

Teams in the 3-year-old conference improved, but the 'experts' didn't seem to notice



Bill DOLEMAN

FROM THE OPENING TIP of the 1998-99 season to the final buzzer, it seemed as though the rest of the nation was down on Big 12 basketball. Having had the opportunity to make a television tour of the league this season, count me among the minority who was, as the kids would say, down with the 3-year-old conference.

Granted, the Big 12 didn't exactly endear itself to anyone during the non-conference season. Among the many self-inflicted pitfalls, Missouri lost to Southwest Missouri State. Oklahoma State dropped a home game to Florida Atlantic, and Texas got off to a much-publicized 2-7 start.

Oddly enough, it was the then-struggling Longhorns who posted the conference's most notable victory before January, however, 73-68 over perennial power Utah.

As the regular season wound down, I'm not sure there was anyone in the country the Longhorns couldn't beat. They, along with several Big 12 teams, got a lot better since the first of the year. Even the "have nots" showed improvement, including Texas A&M and Iowa State, who, with first-year head coaches, ended the regular season with more victories than a year ago.

At times during the 1998-99 campaign, the Big 12 as a whole was listed as low as eighth in someone, somewhere's conference power rankings, behind the Missouri Valley and Atlantic 10, among others. There was even talk in early January that no more than two or three teams would get into the NCAA tournament, and that was being generous.

Part of the reason for the Big 12's lowly image this season lies in the fact that Kansas didn't have a Kansas-like season. Never mind the fact that Oklahoma, Nebraska, Missouri and Texas were better than they were a year ago, KU's struggles were the league's struggles.

In defense of the Jayhawks, how many teams could lose two first-round draft picks and remain at a high level? (Maybe the Blackshirts could answer that.) Still, ESPN.com's Howie Schwab in a pre-tournament internet column listed Kansas as the Big 12's only lock for the Big Dance.

If you listened to the experts (you know, "they" say), it seemed as though all members of the Big 10 were ordained NCAA Tournament bids and first-round byes. Heck, heading into the final week of the season, Minnesota, Purdue and Indiana, despite conference records at or below .500, were in, and Northwestern was considered a bubble team with just 14 victories. Are you kidding?

Just because the Big 10 teams were ranked heading into the conference season should not have meant that they had a lock on the Top 25. Losing to other ranked teams in conference play should not immunize you from being dropped. (See Boilermakers.) The same argument that applies to Big 10 football applies to its basketball teams — don't mistake parity for quality.

Other power conferences such as the ACC, the Pac-10, the SEC and the Big East all had three teams that were a cut above, but for the most part, tradition and/or the territorial media inflated their overall value. Meanwhile, the Big 12 toiled in relative anonymity, getting better by the week without making headway in terms of national perception.

Is there a national title team in the bunch? Probably not. But to say the league was way down was off-base, and neither is it to say that six teams deserved bids, if for no other reason than history says so. No team with a 9-7 mark in conference play had been excluded from the NCAA Tournament.



Kelvin Sampson said the 96-81 loss to NU was the worst whipping he's endured at OU.

Six teams reached that mark, while seven teams, including Nebraska, won at least 17 games.

As of this writing, "Selection Sunday" was still a few days away, which meant that a lot could have happened by the time you read this. But the bottom line is that the Big 12 was much stronger top to middle than any other league in the country.

Danny Nee put together one of the best coaching jobs of his tenure at Nebraska in leading the Huskers out of the depths of a difficult start into a title contender. While it took some time for the Big Red to adjust to the absence of their little big man, Tyronn Lue, once they did, the Huskers were as dangerous as anyone in the league until they began to wear down at season's end. Ask Oklahoma's Kelvin Sampson, who told me his team's 96-81 loss to Nebraska was the worst whipping he's endured at Oklahoma.

Next year, Nebraska will have to adjust to life without Venson Hamilton. But many regard the Huskers' November class of recruits as Nee's best to date, and the experience of being in the race for the conference title will only serve to make this year's youngsters a solid veteran group.

The same could be said for the rest of the conference. The league's combination of veteran coaches and young talent is impressive. Take the sophomore standouts, for example — Marcus Fizer (Iowa State), Jamahl Mosley (Colorado), Ryan Humphrey (Oklahoma), Eric Chenowith (Kansas), Brian Grawer (Missouri), Chad Johnson (Nebraska) and Chris Mihm (Texas) — and you've got the makings of a solid foundation for a basketball power. One that will rank the Big 12 right up there with the best, and not the rest, for a long time to come. ■

***Bill Doleman**'s face is familiar to Cornhusker fans. He is host for several Nebraska-related television programs including the "Husker Show" and coaches' shows for Terry Pettit, Paul Sanderford and Frank Solich.*

Second-Year Coach Following A Plan

The first step for Dave Van Horn's Huskers is to make the Big 12 Tournament



Curt McKEEVER

IF IT HAD HAPPENED in May, people would be talking about how the Nebraska baseball program had finally reached the big time.

Still, for the Huskers to battle second-ranked Rice to the final out — on the Owls' home field and against their No. 1 pitcher — last month was impressive.

Impressive enough to think that it might be an especially hot spring in Nebraska. At least around Buck Beltzer Stadium.

"I don't think anybody will be satisfied if we don't finish a lot better than we did last year," said second-year coach Dave Van Horn.

A year ago, Van Horn had about a month to assemble the Huskers. Still, they managed to put together a 24-20 record — their first winning campaign since 1995. NU also finished one spot short of qualifying for the six-team Big 12 Conference Tournament in Oklahoma City.

"I went down to the (coaches) meeting, went and looked at the ballpark and said, 'Hey, next year, we need to be here,' " Van Horn said.

This year, four Big 12 teams were ranked in the preseason, but Van Horn still expects his club to be one of the eight postseason qualifiers. The field has been expanded to mirror NCAA regional play.

"I think that's really going to make it a lot more exciting. It's going to keep some teams that are seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th place playing hard," Van Horn said. "And not that they don't, but mentally, sometimes, late in the season, if you're not in it, it's just not as important as if you still have a chance."



Dave Van Horn and his staff have made major progress.

Beyond the Big 12 event lies an NCAA regional berth, which is probably a stretch. But as Van Horn has seen before, funny things can happen in conference tournaments.

The coach of 1994 Division II national champion Central Missouri State, Van Horn guided two of his three Northwestern (La.) State teams to Southland Conference crowns. Both times, the Demons were knocked off in the league tournament and denied an NCAA berth.

This year, the NCAA postseason event has been expanded from 48 to 64 teams and will feature 16, four-team, double-elimination regionals, then eight best-of-three super regionals to determine who advances to the College World Series in Omaha's Rosenblatt Stadium June 11-19.

Van Horn shuns talking about reaching the ultimate stop, 50 miles down Interstate 80, but it's obvious that he has that goal in mind.

With the season pushed back one week this season, and another in 2000, teams outside of Sun Belt states figure to be able to attract better players. Nebraska also is discussing a new facility, another perk in the recruiting wars.

Judging from Nebraska's 5-5 start against teams from warmer climates, Van Horn and his staff already are making major progress.

The roster has 23 newcomers, and five of the every-day starters are first-year Huskers. One of those, freshman second baseman Will Bolt, is the first player from Texas to play for NU since Turner Gill in 1982.

"We had a plan, and plan No. 1 was let's just get the best players we can find because we didn't have an early-signing period," Van Horn said. "We needed a leadoff man, we needed outfield speed. We've got a couple, three guys who can lead off. We've got speed. As far as power, we've got a couple guys with pop to help (Ken) Harvey out. We needed another catcher; we got one. We have options this year."

Pitching could be another story. Most of the junior college hurlers NU signed were leftovers, so pitching coach Rob Childress will get a chance to develop some freshmen.

First baseman Harvey, a second-team all-Big 12 performer who hit .388 last season, was off to a monstrous start. The 6-foot-2, 250-pound junior was hitting .513 with five home runs in the first nine games.

Center fielder Adam Shabala, a transfer from Kiswaukee (Ill.) College, and left fielder Jamal Strong, from Citrus (Calif.) College, were batting 1-2 in the order and hitting .500 and .419, respectively. Returning catcher Brian Johnson was at .400, designated hitter Jeff Hedman at .353 and first-year shortstop Brandt Vlieger at .350.

On the mound, right-handed freshmen Shane Komine (Honolulu) and Steve Hale (Yukon, Okla.) were in the starting rotation along with lefty Scott Fries.

Fries — from Dannebrog, Neb., by way of Coffeyville (Kan.) Community College — was the surprise of the early going. In posting a 2.33 earned-run average, he won two of three games and went the distance against Rice, limiting the Owls to nine hits and four earned runs in a 5-3 loss.

"We have a lot more people this year that you can tell can play this game," said Harvey.

Although they may tell you it's hard to get heated up in the middle of February, the players at Rice just might agree.

"We're not looking past this year at all," said Van Horn, always with an eye on the future. "We plan on being in that tournament and hopefully finish high in the standings. There's a lot of expectations from the coaching staff and from the players, and I think you can read it in their faces in the way they work that they want to win."

Even when the Huskers are away from the field, "they're wearing their Nebraska baseball stuff, and they're wearing it proudly," Van Horn said. "I think they like what's going on." ■

Curt McKeever *is a sportswriter, covering the University of Nebraska for the* Lincoln Journal Star. *In addition to reporting on football he is the primary beat writer for the men's basketball and baseball teams.*

Who's Healthy?

With several key players already questionable, Coach Frank Solich is concerned about the team's health entering spring practice

By Mike Babcock

Bobby Newcombe, Dan Alexander, Willie Miller . . .

Coach Frank Solich considered players questionable for spring football practice.

Adam Jultz, Frankie London, Joe Walker . . .

"That's a long list already, isn't it?" Solich asked rhetorically.

"That bothers you because that's what we faced last season. We weren't able to practice with a lot of our big-play, starting-type guys. Even though some of them, maybe, would come back at times, just the continuity of what you get done, the number of reps with all your guys, is not the same.

"That is really kind of carrying over in the spring for some of those guys."

As a result, a primary concern in his second spring as coach is the team's health. "If we can get through the spring without any major injuries, we'll be delighted," Solich said. "That will be a key. Somehow, we need to slow down injuries. We had our fair share of them during the season.

"We want to do everything we







Quarterback Eric Crouch (ablve) and I-back Correll Buckhalter (left) are the only healthy and experienced players available at their positions this spring.

can to make sure we don't keep going at the injury rate we've been. But yet, football is a physical game. It's still blocking and tackling. You still need to work that into spring if you're going to be able to execute. There's a fine line as to how much of it you want to do."

The offensive backfield is of particular concern, with Newcombe, Alexander and Miller sidelined and DeAngelo Evans recovering from post-season knee surgery. "I think DeAngelo needs to get his strength built back up," said Solich. "It's still a little down. So that's somewhat of a question."

With Evans less than full-speed and Alexander recovering from knee surgery, Correll Buckhalter will be the only healthy and experienced I-back available in the spring.

With Miller out because of an abdominal problem, there will be no experienced fullback.

And with Newcombe watching from the sideline while continuing to heal from knee surgery, Eric Crouch will take the majority of snaps at quarterback on the first team.

Crouch and the other quarterbacks will wear green pullover jerseys during contact work to identify them as players who shouldn't be roughed up by tacklers. Also, "we'll use officials every time we have any kind of contact work," Solich said. "They won't let a back get held up (and then hit).

"They'll make sure the whistle gets blown so that no one gets in any extra shots."

As a quarterback, "just like any running back, you're vulnerable," said Solich.

That's even more the case with the Cornhuskers' offense. But the emphasis this spring will be on a power running attack, and that's "not a situation where quarterbacks are really very vulnerable. In run-

ning the option game, that changes a little bit. They're carrying the ball more," he said.

Solich hopes to rebuild a running attack that experienced a dramatic dropoff last season. Nebraska averaged 253.8 rushing yards per game, the best in the Big 12 and sixth-best in the country but the lowest since 1976, when the offense was built around the passing of Vince Ferragamo.

Buckhalter was the Cornhuskers' leading rusher, with 799 yards and eight touchdowns. His yardage was the lowest team-leading total since 1975, when Monte Anthony rushed for 723 yards.

Inconsistency and inexperience in the offensive line and injuries everywhere contributed to the lack of running success. But the run remains the Cornhuskers' first option on offense.

"I don't think there's any question that we need to emphasize the run this spring," Solich said. "We need to get back to being a very good running football team. And we were not necessarily that last season. We're not going to have as much inexperience in the offensive line as what we had.

"It should be a strong point for us. We do have physical guys up front. We do have physical backs. We do have the capability of running a style of offense that can wear people down.

"So we want to make sure we work on that hard this spring."

That doesn't mean Nebraska will ignore the pass, however. In fact, "spring has been traditionally a time when you've probably thrown the ball a little more than what you normally do during the season," said Solich. "That's because it's an area that takes work, and when you are a running team, ad you come off your runs with play-action passes, you want to have very good execution there.

"We'll have to most certainly mix in the passing game. We're not going to abandon that this spring. But we need to make sure that we get back to establishing the run."

The passing game will need some attention. Only one of the team's top four receivers returns, split end Matt Davison, a junior-to-be who led in receptions (32) and receiving yards (394).

So the competition at the receiver positions should be spirited.



Although spring is a time for trying new things, "I don't see there being radical experimentation," Solich said. "We will look at doing some different things, experimenting a little bit.

"That's not uncommon. We do that every year. But it's also a time for evaluation of your players, so you don't want them fairly confused. You want them knowing what they're doing so you can make a very good evaluation of them as to who deserves to be No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 and so forth."

A few players will move to new positions, not only to give youngsters an opportunity to get on the field quicker but also to fill needs created by departures and injuries.

With Ben Kingston the only scholarship fullback available for spring, for example, someone might be moved there, depending on the play of a group of walkons, including Tyrone Uhlir, Nick Gragert, Hank Piening, Jeremy Stanislav, Chris Cielocha, Paul Kastl and Casey Hughes.

Also, there could be some changes in the offensive line because of "some of the styles of defenses we're facing and what we've asking of our offensive linemen," Solich said.

"Certainly those guys who have been starters will line up as starters."

They just might not be lining up at the same positions as last season.

Dominic Raiola, who played both guard and center as a redshirted freshman, "will concentrate at center," Solich said. "That's one thing we're going to try to do in the offensive line.

"We're going to try to not have a guy learn more than one position, which we were forced to do last year

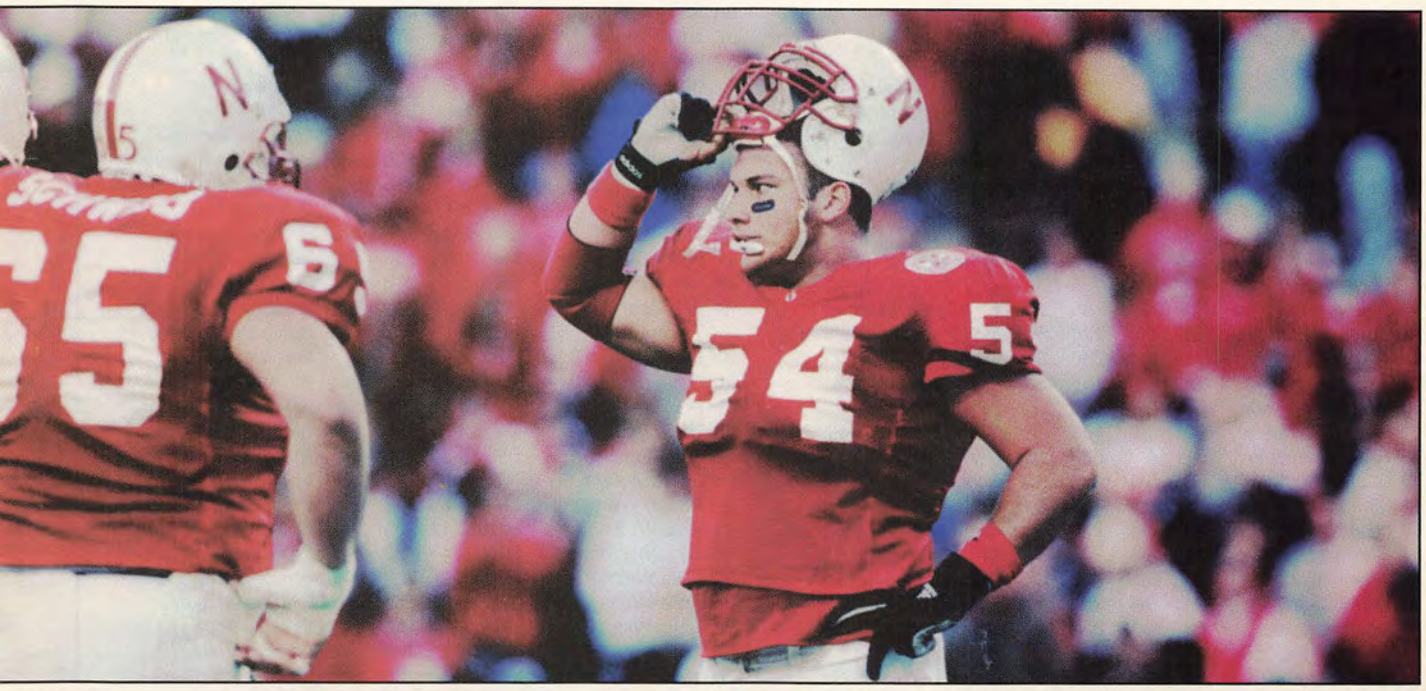




"If we can get through the spring without any major injuries, we'll be delighted. That will be a key. Somehow, we need to slow down injuries. We had our fair share of them during the season."

— Frank Solich

Split end Matt Davison (left), a junior-to-be led Nebraska in receptions (32) and receiving yards (394). Dominic Raiola (below), who played both guard and center as a redshirted freshman, will concentrate on center.



1999 Nebraska Spring Roster

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.	Hometown (school)
99	Demoine Adams	RR	6-2	225	Fr	PineBluff, Ark.
	Scott Aguglia	SE	6-2	200	Fr.	Lincoln (Southeast)
38	Dan Alexander	IB	6-0	245	Jr.	Wentzville, Mo.
89	Luis Almanzar	DT	6-3	290	Jr.	Jersey City, N.J.
64	Steve Alstadt	OG	6-5	275	So.	Fort Calhoun
28	Josh Anderson	RCB	5-8	175	Jr.	Wahoo
82	Sean Applegate	WB	5-9	185	Sr.	Lincoln (High)
41	Rod Baker	SLB	6-0	225	Jr.	Hastings (Adams Central)
51	Matt Baldwin	C	6-2	285	Sr.	Arvada, Colo.
94	Damien Bauman	TE	6-3	260	Sr.	Auburndale, Fla.
33	Sasho Becvarsvski	TE	6-4	255	Jr.	Crown Point, Ind.
	Jeremy Bender	WB	5-11	185	Fr.	Lincoln (Northeast)
20	Tom Beveridge	SE	6-0	190	Jr.	Sutherland
4	Mic Boettner	ROV	6-0	200	Fr.	Omaha (Millard North)
14	Dion Booker	FS	6-1	205	So.	Oceanside, Calif.
84	Jon Bowling	TE	6-3	240	Fr.	Lincoln (Southeast)
39	Josh Brown	K	6-2	185	Fr.	Foyil, Okla.
21	Mike Brown	ROV	5-10	205	Sr.	Scottsdale, Ariz.
22	Ralph Brown II	RCB	5-10	180	Sr.	Hacienda Heights, Calif.
36	Correll Buckhalter	IB	6-0	220	Jr.	Collins, Miss.
39	Ben Buettenback	MLB	5-11	220	Sr.	Hastings
48	Jamie Burrow	MLB	6-1	235	So.	Ames, Iowa
	Chris Butler	IB	5-11	200	Fr.	Hoover, Ala.
11	Joe Chrisman	QB	5-11	190	Fr.	Longmont, Colo.
39	Chris Cielocha	FB	5-11	230	So.	Columbus (Scotus)
55	Jon Clanton	NT	6-2	270	Fr.	Glendale, Ariz.
59	Wes Cody	OG	6-2	275	Fr.	Fremont (Bergan)
21	Danny Cork	WB	5-9	200	Fr.	Owasso, Okla.
89	Ben Cornelson	WB	5-10	175	So.	Shawnee, Kan.
52	Jon Coyne	MLB	6-4	220	So.	Omaha (Westside)
3	Keyuo Craver	LCB	5-10	190	So.	Harleton, Texas
7	Eric Crouch	QB	6-1	195	So.	Omaha (Millard North)
86	WillDabbert	TE	6-4	240	Fr.	Lincoln (East)
3	Matt Davison	SE	6-1	180	Jr.	Tecumseh
85	T.J. DeBates	TE	6-3	250	Sr.	Stewartville, Minn.
2	Mike Demps	RCB	5-10	195	Fr.	Fort Worth, Texas
30	Dahrran Diedrick	IB	6-0	215	Fr.	Scarborough, Ontario
76	Billy Diekmann	OT	6-3	290	Jr.	Cheney (Norris)
81	Chad Duryea	SE	6-3	215	Fr.	Merna
33	Mitch Ebke	FS	6-1	195	Jr.	Fairbury
4	DeAngelo Evans	IB	5-9	215	Jr.	Wichita, Kan.
19	Clint Finley	FS	6-0	205	Jr.	Cuero, Texas
83	Craig Fischer	SE	6-0	175	Sr.	Leigh
38	Eric Fischer	ROV	5-11	200	Jr.	Leigh
25	Austin Forster	WB	5-9	185	Fr.	Gordon
58	Gabe Fries	WLB	6-2	225	Fr.	Benkelman
29	Patrick Friesen	SE	5-11	185	So.	Henderson
8	John Gibson	WB	6-0	180	Jr.	Papillion
99	Aaron Golliday	TE	6-4	270	Fr.	York
46	Nick Gragert	FB	5-11	220	So.	Columbus
70	Mike Green	OG	6-4	290	So.	Omaha (Westside)
2	DeAntae Grixby	IB	5-8	200	Fr.	Omaha (Central)
5	DeJuan Groce	LCB	5-10	190	Fr.	Gerald Heights, Ohio
97	Matt Grummert	RR	6-2	235	Jr.	Fairbury
53	Chris Gustafson	SLB	6-2	220	So.	Gallup, N.M.
13	Sam Gutz	QB	5-10	175	Fr.	Columbus
91	Seth Gutz	SE	6-1	190	Jr.	Columbus
51	Andy Gwennap	OG	6-2	275	Fr.	Smith Center, Kan.
17	Dan Hadenfeldt	PK	5-11	195	Sr.	Des Moines, Iowa
45	Brad Hamik	FS	6-0	185	Jr.	Hawarden, Iowa
7	Troy Hassebroek	WB	6-4	220	Fr.	Lincoln (High)
78	Aaron Havlovic	C	6-4	280	Sr.	Osceola
18	Jeff Hemje	RCB	6-0	185	So.	Grand Island
80	Larry Henderson	SE	6-1	190	Jr.	Los Angeles, Calif.
10	Dan Hennings	SE	6-0	195	Fr.	Omaha (Westside)
55	Russ Hochstein	OG	6-3	280	Jr.	Hartington (Cedar Cath.)
44	Casey Hughes	FB	6-1	220	Fr.	Scotia
24	Matt Ickes	RCB	5-10	205	So.	Page
50	Julius Jackson	WLB	6-1	240	Sr.	Gainesville, Texas
27	Eric Johnson	WLB	6-1	205	Sr.	Phoenix, Ariz
69	Adam Julch	OT	6-5	320	Sr.	Omaha (Burke)
91	Loran Kaiser	DT	6-4	290	Jr.	Farwell (St. Paul)
47	Paul Kastl	FB	5-10	220	Fr.	Lincoln (Pius X)
57	Chris Kelsay	LR	6-5	255	Fr.	Auburn
22	Ben Kingston	FB	6-1	240	Sr.	Omaha (Westside)
9	John Klem	WB	6-0	200	Fr.	Lincoln (East)
57	Scott Koethe	OG	6-5	320	Fr.	Central City
47	Josh Kohl	WLB	6-1	230	Sr.	Hastings
75	Kyle Kollmorgen	OT	6-5	290	So.	Lincoln (Southeast)
53	David Kolowski	C	6-4	285	Fr.	Omaha (Millard West)
67	Nate Kolterman	OT	6-3	310	Fr.	Seward
1	Paul Kosch	WB	5-10	190	Fr.	Humphrey (St. Francis)
6	Adam Lechtenberg	RCB	5-8	185	Fr.	Butte
29	Gregg List	ROV	5-11	220	Sr.	Valentine
70	Jason Lohr	NT	6-2	275	So.	Tulsa, Okla.
1	Frankie London	WB	5-11	170	Sr.	Lake Charles, La.
28	Chace Long	PK	6-1	195	Jr.	Wahoo
86	Jeremy Lyman	RR	6-2	210	Fr.	Salt Lake City, Utah
82	Stephen Manning	NT	6-1	235	Fr.	Knoxville, Tenn.
	Dwayne McClary	WB	6-0	185	Jr.	Rochester, N.Y.
35	Shawn McGann	WB	5-11	195	Fr.	Granger, Ind.
71	Matt McGinn	NT	6-1	280	So.	Anselmo
32	Greg McGraw	FS	6-2	200	Sr.	Millville, N.J.
90	Jake McKee	TE	6-2	230	Jr.	Goodland, Kan.
36	Levi Mehl	WLB	6-0	205	So.	Crete
15	Willie Miller	FB	6-1	240	Jr.	Omaha (Bellevue West)
93	Brandon Mooberry	LR	6-5	245	Jr.	Lexington
7	Chris Moran	LCB	5-11	180	Jr.	Frederick, Md.
43	John Murphy	TE	6-3	260	Jr.	Crawford
87	Casey Nelson	DT	6-1	270	So.	Newman Grove
62	Jeff Nelson	DT	6-7	285	Fr.	Superior
12	Bobby Newcombe	QB	6-0	195	Jr.	Albuquerque, N.M.
87	Andrew Offner	DT	6-3	285	Fr.	Red Cloud
37	Tony Ortiz	SLB	6-1	220	Sr.	New York, N.Y.
44	Jon Penny	SLB	6-1	225	So.	Lawrence, Kan.
5	Jeff Perino	QB	6-2	215	Sr.	Durango, Colo.
37	Hank Piening	FB	6-2	215	Jr.	Milford
13	Carlos Polk	MLB	6-2	250	Jr.	Rockford, Ill.
10	Brandon Quindt	ROV	5-11	200	Jr.	Scottsbluff
54	Dominic Raiola	C	6-2	295	So.	Honolulu, Hawaii
31	Tyler Rauenzahn	IB	5-9	200	Fr.	Colorado Springs, Colo.
23	Steve Raymond	SLB	5-11	215	Sr.	Gering
85	Kyle Ringenberg	RR	6-4	230	Fr.	Elkhorn
16	Jay Runty	QB	6-0	205	Jr.	Elkhorn
66	Jon Rutherford	OG	6-3	295	So.	Midwest City, Okla.
80	Eric Ryan	RR	6-1	235	So.	Overton
79	Chris Saalfeld	OG	6-3	280	Jr.	North Bend
65	Jason Schwab	OT	6-1	300	Sr.	Eagan, Minn.
4	Scott Shanle	SLB	6-2	225	Fr.	St. Edward
46	Brian Shaw	SLB	6-1	220	Sr.	Deweese (Sandy Creek)
63	James Sherman	OG	6-4	295	Sr.	LaVerne, Calif.
62	Matt Shook	OG	6-2	270	Fr.	Medina, Ohio
72	Leif Sidwell	OT	6-5	280	Fr.	Kearney
56	Jeremy Slechta	DT	6-6	280	So.	Lavista
92	Justin Smith	LR	6-4	250	Fr.	Sherman, Texas
52	Luke Smith	MLB	6-1	230	Fr.	York
	Brandon Solt	SE	6-3	175	Fr.	Wamego, Kan.
48	Jeremy Stanislav	FB	6-0	210	Jr.	Prague
34	Randy Stella	WLB	6-0	205	Fr.	Omaha (Benson)
16	Erwin Swiney	LCB	6-0	185	Jr.	Lincoln (Northeast)
15	Chuck Tack	PK	6-5	215	So.	Omaha (Millard South)
73	Jim Tansey	OT	6-3	300	Sr.	Cranford, N.J.
90	Tony Tata	MLB	6-1	240	Fr.	Honolulu, Hawaii
17	Aaron Terpening	FS	5-11	185	Fr.	North Salem, Ore.
6	Wilson Thomas	SE	6-5	210	Fr.	Omaha (North)
24	Alik Tillery	IB	5-10	200	So.	Brussels, Belgium
35	Tyrone Uhlir	FB	6-0	235	Fr.	Battle Creek
83	Kyle Vanden Bosch	RR	6-4	270	Jr.	Larchwood, Iowa
26	Casey Vanderhoef	WB	5-11	175	Jr.	Alpine, Utah
9	Mark Vedral	WLB	5-11	210	So.	Gregory, S.D.
58	Dave Volk	OT	6-5	295	So.	Battle Creek
25	Joe Walker	FS	5-10	195	Jr.	Arlington, Texas
96	Steve Warren	NT	6-2	315	Sr.	Springfield, Mo.
	Adrian Warrior	LR	6-5	240	Fr.	Bloomfield
42	Troy Watchorn	ROV	5-11	200	Jr.	Columbus
95	J.P. Wichmann	RR	6-4	220	So.	Shawnee, Kan.
50	Mike Wilford	OL	6-3	300	Fr.	Stevensville, Mich.
81	Aaron Wills	LR	6-2	250	Sr.	Omaha (Burke)
88	Colin Wills	LR	6-1	240	Fr.	Omaha (Burke)
87	Tracey Wistrom	TE	6-5	220	So.	Webb City, Mo.
20	Wes Woodward	ROV	5-8	180	So.	Omaha (Cr. Prep)

because of lack of depth. I think that hurts you. Offensive line is complicated, and if you get to the point where you have guys learning more than one position, that really complicates things.

"So I think we'll be able to get away from that this spring, and this fall."

The Cornhuskers began spring practice on March 22 and will conclude with the Red-White intrasquad game on April 17. The practice schedule is as in the past: Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday except for the final week, which will include only two days of practice and the Red-White game.

With only 15 days of practice in the spring, "we've got to maximize every day; there is no question," Solich said. "Your players really have to pay attention in meetings. It can't be a deal where there is no focus for part of practice, part of a meeting. Guys have got to really be zeroed in.

"You only get so many opportunities in the spring to learn the system, to get to where you can execute the system at a high level. If you don't take full advantage of that, you just don't want to be developing yourself as a player the way you need to — and you won't be developing as a team."

In order to develop as a team, every able-bodied player needs to be involved. That's why Solich, like Tom Osborne before him, is hesitant to hold out healthy veteran offensive backs to keep them from being injured in the spring, as former Oklahoma Coach Barry Switzer often did.

"As we looked at that, we always felt that they (the Sooners) were more vulnerable at the beginning of the season than they were at the end of the season in terms of timing, in terms of those backs who were held out completely being ready to play," Solich said. "You want to have your team exposed to some contact, but certainly no unnecessary risk and try to use as much precaution as you can."

The injury list already was long enough the day spring practice was to begin. ■

"We've got to maximize every day; there is no question. Your players really have to pay attention in meetings. It can't be a deal where there is no focus for part of practice, part of a meeting. Guys have got to really be zeroed in."

— Frank Solich



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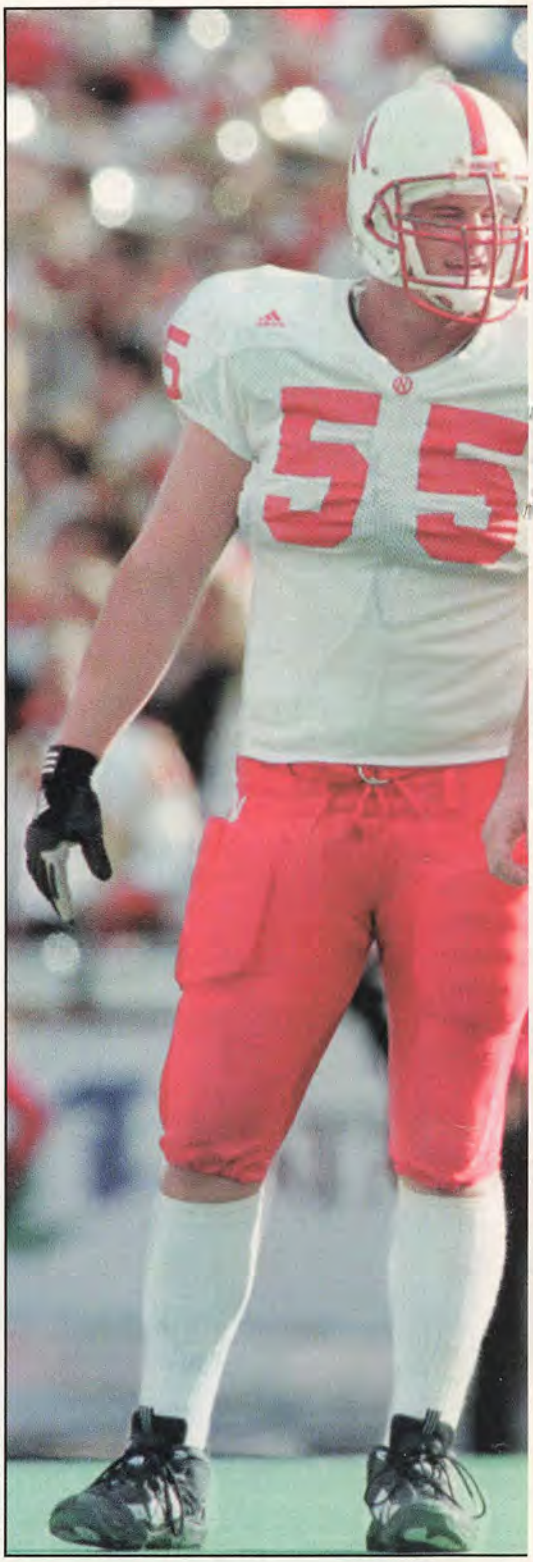
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Wakeup Call

Junior Russ Hochstein and his fellow offensive linemen have plenty of incentive during 7 a.m. workouts

By Mike Babcock



Scott Bruhn

Rise up and shine . . .

Russ Hochstein is not an early-morning person. Not since he came to Nebraska, anyway.

"College is the worst place for that," he said recently. "It breeds laziness, in a way. You get used to sleeping in, not having class until 9:30 or 10:30 some mornings."

But Hochstein has conditioned himself to rise at 6:15 a.m.

"I'm getting used to it," he said. "It's like clockwork now, even on mornings off. It's like anything; you just have to train your body to get used to it. I think most of us have."

The "most of us" to whom Hochstein referred are the offensive linemen on the Cornhusker football team. Four days a week during the winter strength and conditioning program they arrived at the west stadium at 7 a.m. to lift. Those who were late, or skipped, were penalized.

"We ran," said Hochstein. "So there was some incentive."

The discipline was unnecessary, however. "We have a really good group of guys who are all determined to get better and stronger and bigger," he said. "So I think it really worked well for us."

The lifting had to be done anyway. But the 7 a.m. start was the idea of next season's senior offensive linemen, among them Adam Julch, Jason Schwab, James Sherman and Matt Baldwin.

They met with the rest of the linemen and proposed the early-morning schedule. After checking everyone's class schedule, they determined that 7 a.m. would work best.

"If we didn't get finished, we had to come back," said Hochstein, who had class at 8 a.m. on two days the linemen lifted. "It's like anything. You have to do something and a lot of times you put it off. I think the way we did it, we had to come in and get it done — and do it with intensity.

"When we're all there as a group, we can push one another."

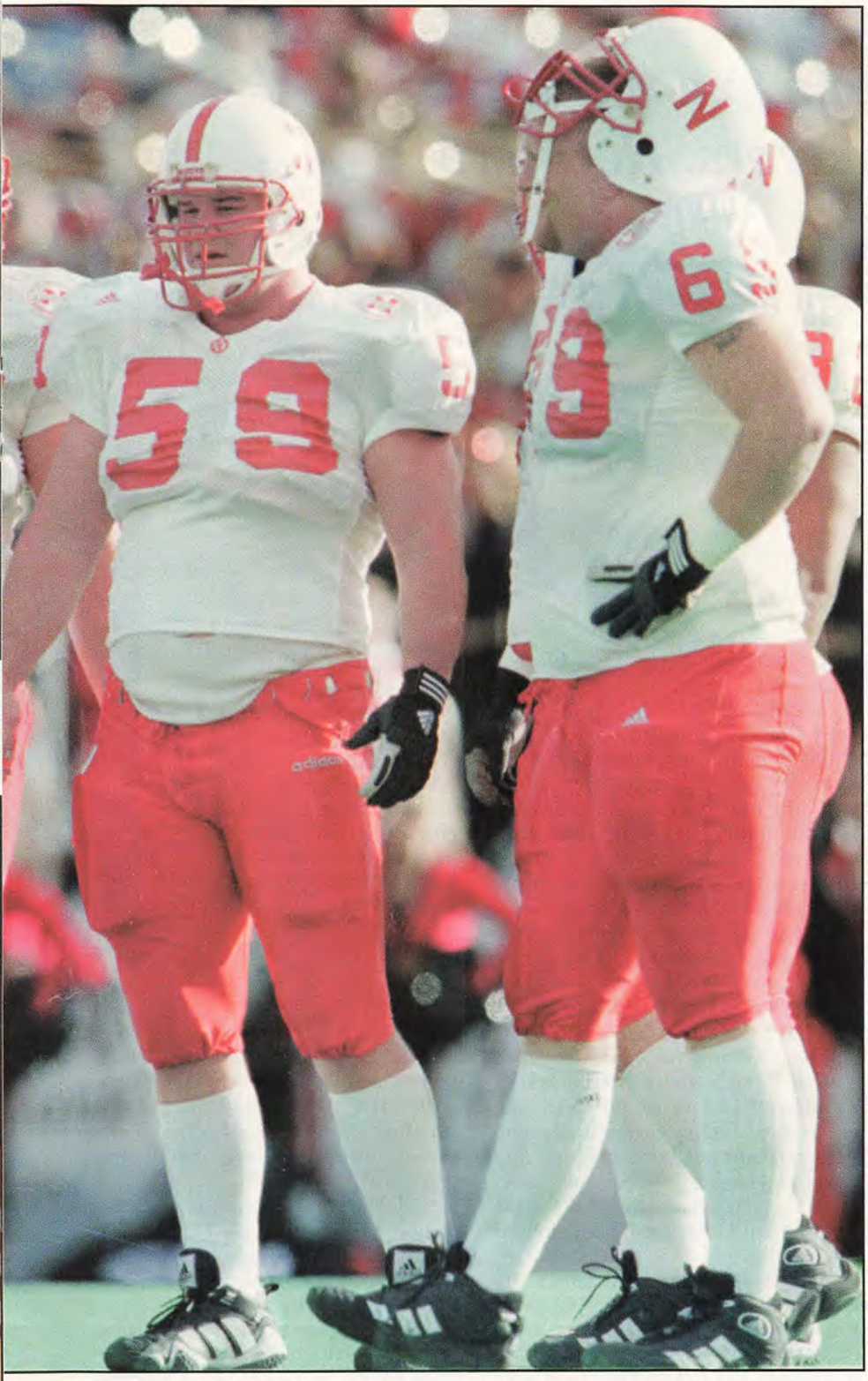
Not that the offensive linemen needed much pushing from each other, or anyone else. Last season's No. 6 national ranking in rushing offense was incentive enough. The ranking was the lowest at Nebraska in more than 20 years. The offensive line is all too familiar with the statistics of it.

That drove Hochstein and his linemates through winter conditioning, and it will continue to drive them during spring practice. "You only take so much criticism," he said. "And after a while . . .

"Guys read the newspapers. They see things on TV. So they know what's being said."

And much of what was said about the offensive line last season was uncomplimentary.

The criticism, implied as well as direct, hasn't made the linemen bitter, said Hochstein, who started the final three regular-season games and the Holiday Bowl game at right guard and earned All-Big 12 honorable mention from the conference coaches. But it has motivated them.



Russ Hochstein (left) and Adam Julch (right) are two of the returning starters on the offensive line. Nebraska will have to replace starting center Josh Heskew (59).

"I think it's made the guys come together and really want to work harder," he said. "I think they kind of see that and they know as a group it's better if we stick together, unity-wise.

"This has been a good winter for that. We've really got a lot of unity. People are really pulling together. You're seeing more of a closeness than we've ever had in the past."

And his assessment isn't limited to the offensive line.

"The attitude and the work ethic this winter has been really good," Hochstein said as the winter conditioning program began its final week. "I think it's been a very intense winter.

"Guys are really getting after it. I think we've learned from last season. We lost four games, and I think that guys really don't ever want that to happen again; they don't want to let it happen.

"I'm amazed. I think the weight room this winter has been about as intense as I've ever seen it. I watched some younger guys really step it up, putting on strength and getting bigger. I think it's gone from seniors down to the redshirt freshmen from last year. I really do. I think the attitude is tremendous."

Hochstein, who will be a junior in the fall, is working to get bigger. He played at 280 pounds last season, after weighing only 240 pounds when he arrived at Nebraska three years ago.

Gaining weight and getting stronger are givens for individuals. They must be achieved in order for the offensive line to improve. "When you talk about offensive linemen, I don't know if it's so much personal goals," said Hochstein. "I think it's more the offensive line's goals.

"I think we all see it as a group because that's how we function. We function every day like that. Even through the winter when we lifted in the morning, we were a group. It's not just one guy getting up and one guy missing — and who cares if he misses because he's above that. No."

As a result, his personal goals for spring practice can't be distinguished from the offensive line's goals. "I want to see the reps we take, I want to see things clean, clear," he said.

"As a group, we need to run our offense a little smoother, get to point A and point B and make effective blocks, beat guys one-on-one. We want to show that we can run the ball this spring and get back to the basics. That's what spring ball is good for, bringing everybody back to the basics."

To that end, the offensive linemen rose early at least four mornings a week during the winter to lift. Hochstein's dad, Gayle, the mayor of Hartington, Neb., was impressed.

"When I told him we were going to be lifting that early, he said: 'Well, you're going to have to learn to get up in the morning, huh?' And I said: 'Yeah, I'm going to have to learn to do it.' "

Going into the last week, Hochstein had yet to be late, or miss.■

Spring practice is a time to search for answers. Here are

5 ????? Questions ?????



How much will Nebraska miss Joel Makovicka at fullback? With Willie Miller (right) still recovering from abdominal surgery, Ben Kingston (far right) will be the only scholarship fullback on the spring depth chart.

The frustration of Nebraska's 23-20 loss against Arizona in the Holiday Bowl game had yet to dissipate substantially. But the morning after, Frank Solich was looking ahead to the spring.

He was particularly concerned about the situation at quarterback.

The position, "health-wise, right now going into the spring, is not great," he told a handful of reporters. "That will be a priority, making sure that we're getting something done as far as the other young quarterbacks in our system because we know this year what can happen."

What can happen — and did — is that injuries can deplete a position, forcing a coach to turn to a second- and even third-team player. "Sometimes you can get through the season with your No. 1 guy and be pretty fortunate," Solich said. "But we had several (positions) where that wasn't the case. We're going to try to develop backups at every position, but it's certainly going to be critical at quarterback."

A year ago, the competition at quarterback was arguably the most interesting aspect of spring practice, with Bobby Newcombe, Eric Crouch and Frankie London attempting to win the No. 1 job.

Newcombe, of course, emerged atop the depth chart.

All three return. But only Crouch will be playing quarterback this spring.

London moved to wingback last season before suffering a broken leg. And Newcombe will be sidelined in the spring while recovering from reconstructive surgery on his left knee.

Newcombe's absence is a significant concern, not only because he could benefit from the practice but also because without him, there won't be another experienced quarterback on the field — which means, Crouch will be issued a green pullover to wear during contact work on occasion.

Those in green pullover jerseys aren't supposed to be hit by defensive players.

Depth at quarterback is a concern. So what's a coach to do?

That's among many questions this spring, though the quarterback situation won't be resolved until fall, when Newcombe returns and scholarship freshmen Jammal Lord and Carl Crawford arrive. For now, however, Crouch's back-ups will be: Jay Runty, Sam Gutz, Joe Chrisman and Jeff Perino.

Runty, Gutz and Chrisman are walkons. Perino, a scholarship recruit in 1995, has had medical exempt status because of knee problems since the fall of 1997 (see State of the Huskers, Page 9).

He has been an undergraduate assistant the last two seasons.

Runty, a junior-to-be from Elkhorn, Neb., made brief appearances in four games last season, rushing three times for 59 yards but not throwing a pass. Gutz, who's from Columbus, Neb., and and Chrisman, who's from Longmont, Colo., both sat out last season as redshirt freshmen.

Chrisman underwent patellar tendon surgery following the season.

Oh yes, redshirted freshman Josh Brown also could take some snaps. Don't laugh. Brown, who played quarterback in high school, is a talented enough athlete to play the position.

"Josh is a tremendous athlete," Solich said recently. "He has the ability to play a couple of positions, maybe two or three positions . . . and it's not out of the question."

The biggest question going into spring practice, which is scheduled to begin on March 22 and conclude with the Red-White intrasquad game on April 17, is whether or not the Cornhuskers can resurrect their running game, which suffered from injuries and inconsistency in the offensive line in 1998.

But there are other questions of varying importance for which answers could at least begin to become apparent during the spring. Here are five, in no particular order of significance.

(Eligibility listings reflect what the player will be in the fall.)





1 WHO WILL REPLACE JOEL MAKOVICKA AT FULLBACK?

Makovicka ranked with the best fullbacks in Cornhusker history. He was a tenacious blocker as well as a running threat. He is third all-time among Nebraska fullbacks in rushing yards. He also was an emotional leader, another role that must be filled before the 1999 season-opener at Iowa on Sept. 4.

There won't be a lot of familiar names at fullback on the depth chart in the spring. The only scholarship fullback will be Ben Kingston, a senior from Omaha who originally walked on.

Willie Miller, who played in every game last season as a sophomore and rushed for 94 yards and two touchdowns, is still recovering from surgery for an abdominal problem similar to the one that has hampered several other Cornhuskers, among them I-back DeAngelo Evans.

The rest of the fullback candidates in the spring are walkons, which means scholarship recruit Judd Davies from Omaha Millard North High School probably will get a good look in the fall.

As for Makovicka's leadership skills, they'll be extremely difficult to replace.

2 WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH ALL OF THOSE SCHOLARSHIP TIGHT ENDS?

When recruit Trevor Johnson arrives from Lincoln Northeast High School in the fall, Nebraska will have six tight ends on scholarship. Count them. The five who will participate in spring practice are: T. J. DeBates, Tracey Wistrom, Sasho Becvarovski, Jon Bowling and Aaron Golliday.

DeBates and Wistrom were in the rotation with Sheldon Jackson last season, with DeBates starting eight of the 10 games in which he played and Wistrom starting once in 12 games.

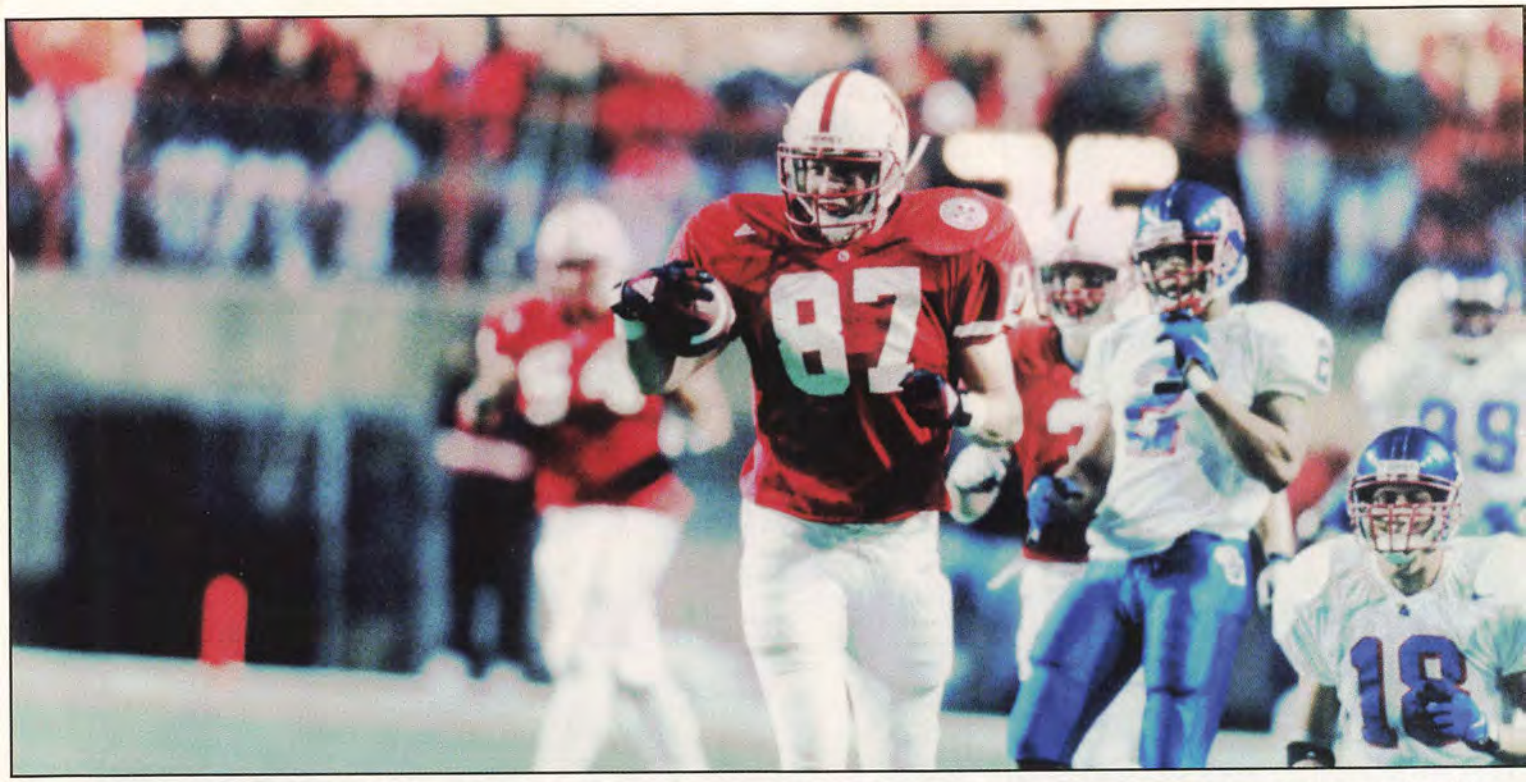
Becvarovski was recruited out of Crown Point, Ind., as an interior offensive lineman.

Bowling and Golliday both redshirted last season as freshmen.

At a news conference to announce this year's scholarship recruits, Solich was asked whether any of the tight ends might switch positions. "We will see how it all plays out," he replied. "But right now, we plan on lining them all up at tight end. As I look at that group, they're multi-talented.

"We've talked about most of those guys having the ability to play other places. We'll see how it all plays out for them. If a guy is lining up third or fourth or fifth at that spot and is wanting to change, is open to change, that's a possibility. But we will not force anyone to change."

Spring is a time for such deci-



Tracey Wistrom, who lettered as a freshman backup to Sheldon Jackson last season, is one of five scholarship tight ends on the Nebraska roster.

sions, however.

Oh yes, there are some walkons who will be competing at tight end in the spring, too, among them Damien Bauman, the transfer from Central Florida, and Jake McKee.

3 WHO WILL EMERGE AS THE PLACEKICKER AND THE PUNTER?

Placekicker Kris Brown and punter Bill Lafleur, like Makovicka, will be difficult to replace.

In addition to setting a dozen or so school records, Brown established one NCAA career record (extra-point kicks made) and tied another (extra-point kicks attempted) during his four seasons.

Lafleur established a Nebraska single-season record by averaging 44.7 yards per punt.

One player could succeed both of them, and give the Cornhuskers another placekicker named Brown. Josh Brown goes into the spring as the favorite, in competition with walkons Dan Hadenfeldt and Chace Long. As mentioned earlier, Josh Brown is an exceptional athlete, who kicked a 61-yard field goal in the state playoffs as a junior and averaged 40.8 yards per punt as a high school senior.

"He's a talented athlete," Solich said. "You look at Kris (Brown), Kris was a tremendous athlete. So he (Josh Brown) fits into the category of the kickers we've had in terms of athletic ability, guys who have really gotten it done for us when it was on the line."

Hadenfeldt, a senior from Des Moines, Iowa, was listed on the depth chart as the top back-up at both placekicker and punter last season. But he attempted only one extra-point kick, which failed.

Long, a junior from Wahoo, Neb., is a placekicker.

4 WILL RUSH END REMAIN A HIGH-PROFILE POSITION ON DEFENSE?

This question probably can be answered before the start of spring practice. Yes.

Despite the loss of Chad Kelsay and Mike Rucker, regulars Kyle Vanden Bosch and Aaron Wills return and will be joined in competition by, among others, Brandon Mooberry, J. P. Wichmann and redshirted scholarship freshmen Chris Kelsay, Justin Smith and Demoine Adams.

Vanden Bosch has been regarded as the next in line on the list of outstanding Cornhusker rush ends, following such recent ones as Rucker,



Kyle Vanden Bosch, a 6-4, 270-pound junior-to-be, could be the next outstanding Nebraska rush end.

Chad Kelsay, Grant Wistrom and Jared Tomich.

Chris Kelsay was listed third on the depth chart behind brother Chad at left rush end most of last season and was even included on the travel roster but wasn't used. Smith, who's from Sherman, Texas, might have been in a similar situation if not for a shoulder injury suffered during fall practice.

5 WHICH OF THE REDSHIRTED FRESHMEN WILL ASSERT THEMSELVES?

Nebraska's 1998 scholarship recruiting class still looks good a year later.

Keyuo Craver, Jason Lohr and Jeremy Slechta all came on to make significant contributions as true freshmen and several others in the class are expected to assert themselves this spring.

In fairness, just about all of the members of that class could be listed here. But in the interests of brevity, besides those already mentioned, look for defensive backs Mike Demps and DeJuan Groce, offensive lineman Nate Kolterman and defensive lineman Jon Clanton to step up.

Early in fall camp a year ago, Demps, Groce and Clanton all received serious consideration for avoiding redshirts. Kolterman, like nearly every offensive lineman was bound to redshirt.

Linebacker Tony Tata also could step right in, as could wide receiver Wilson Thomas.

OK. So we might as well not leave anyone out. The others in the class were running back DeAntae Grixby, linebacker Randy Stella, wingback Shawn McGann and offensive linemen Wes Cody and Matt Shook — though Grixby, a January enrollee, and Stella officially count against this year's scholarship total.

Stella is coming off an injury and might be limited during the spring.

The 1998 recruiting class was solid. It "will show strongly this spring and this fall," said Solich. "There are a few who need to step it up. But all in all, I think it was an outstanding class."

And that's not even including redshirted freshman walkons, such as wide receiver Brandon Solt and middle linebacker Jon Coyne, who could turn some heads during the spring. ■

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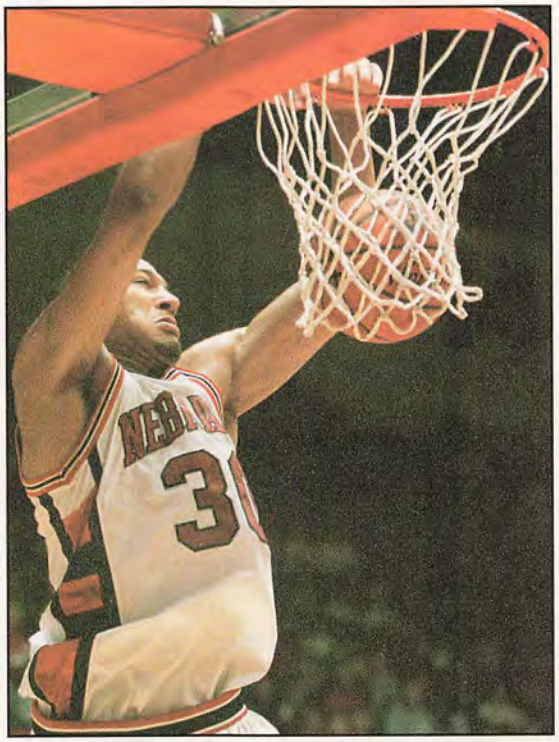
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DEFENSE Is His Specialty

By Mike Babcock



But this Cookie is also a dunker

Junior guard Cookie Belcher is most noted for his defense (right), but he was also was the team's second leading scorer, with many of the points coming on dunks (left) after steals.

Scott Bruhn

Danny Nee was still talking about Cookie Belcher's performance two days after Nebraska's 59-57 victory against Iowa State at the Devaney Sports Center in mid-February.

"Unbelievable. When I see the film and I see the steals, the blocks, the tips, the play underneath the basket where he stole it and made the layup, I mean, he's a great defensive player," Nee said.

"There are so many things he does that help us besides score."

Belcher's statistics for 31 minutes, playing with a sprained right wrist, were fairly typical: 14 points, four rebounds, four assists, three blocked shots, three steals and no turnovers.

Iowa State coach Larry Eustachy called him the best off-guard in the Big 12.

The steal and layup to which Nee referred came in the second half to short-circuit a Cyclone rally. Marcus Fizer was the victim of Belcher's Big 12-leading 73rd theft of the season.

Depending on how many games Nebraska extended the season, Belcher could hold the school single-season record for steals by now. The record is — or was — 89, by Erick Strickland in 1994-95.

In any case, Belcher will be, at most, only a handful of steals short of Strickland's school career record. And he has three of the top four single-season steal totals in school history.

"His defense on the ball is just tremendous," said Nee. "I mean, he really makes people nervous. And he's constantly distorting our defense and causing the offense to move out a step or two because of his quick hands. He has the best set of hands and feet in the business.

"He's really a tremendous defensive player. Tremendous."

The 6-foot-4, 205-pound junior from Mexico, Mo., is physically imposing, with broad shoulders and a powerful upper body, which give him the look of an outside linebacker.

He also has the uncanny sense of a linebacker. "I just kind of anticipate really good, you know," Belcher said, trying to explain his success at making steals. "I just have a knack for being at the right place at the right time, I think. I kind of bait the player into throwing it. I kind of take a step off the passing lane and then when he throws it, I jump out there real quick and try to get the deflection."

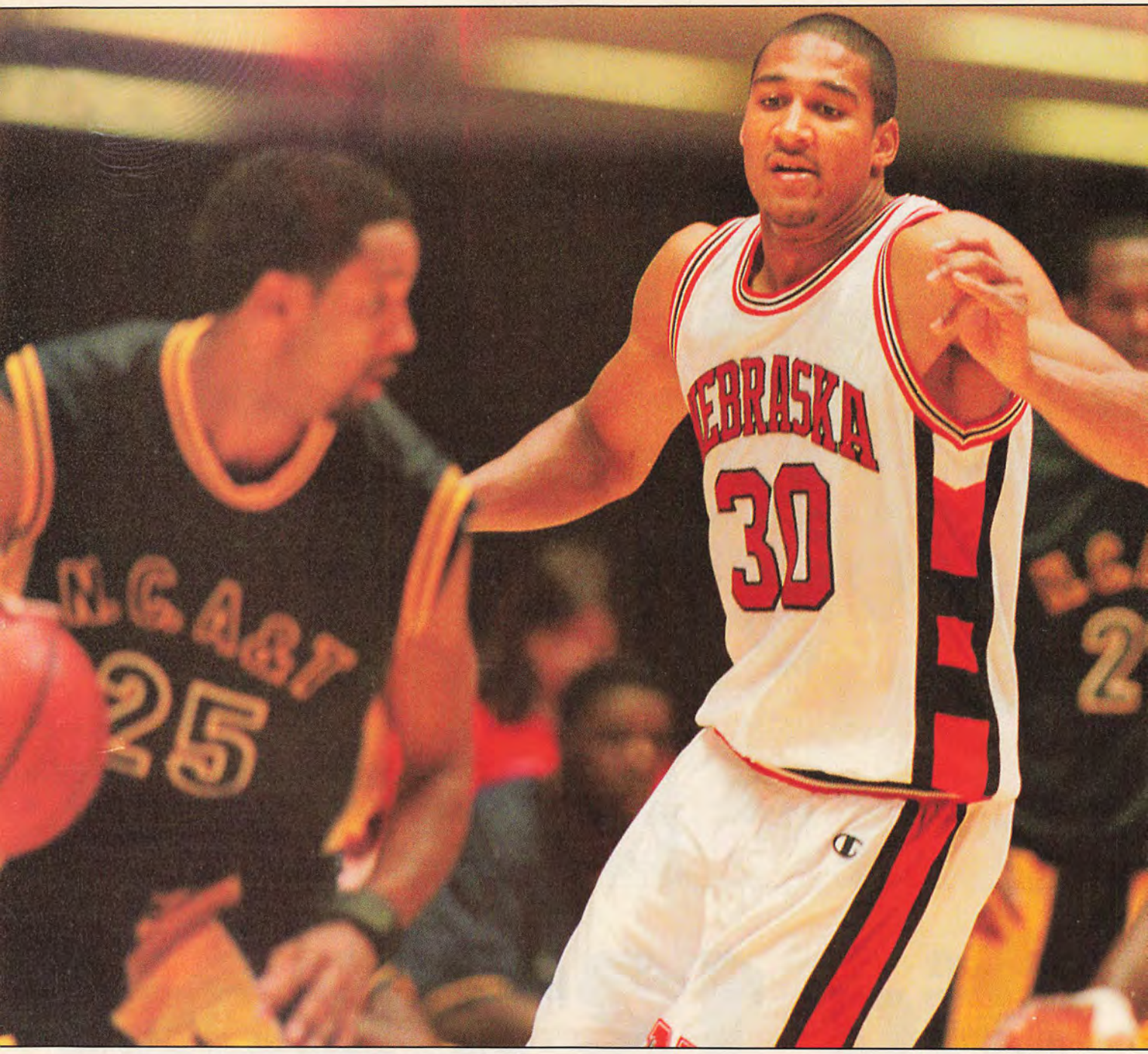
More than once this season the rest of the Cornhuskers have headed to the other end of the court to play defense after scoring, only to turn and discover that Belcher has stolen the ball.

During the second half of Nebraska's first victory against Kansas at Lawrence since 1983, a Belcher steal helped turn the momentum that had produced an 11-point Jayhawk lead.

"He's so good defensively that he's going to have three or four steals, and a lot of times those steals become easy baskets," Kansas coach Roy Williams said during a Big 12 coaches' teleconference. "He'll also get a couple of offensive rebounds, and he'll score his 10 or 12 points every night.

"When you're playing Nebraska, Cookie sets the table for everything."

And everyone. Belcher has contributed significantly to the success of



senior center Venson Hamilton, leading the team in assists and alleviating the offensive pressure with his scoring.

Belcher has been second on the team in scoring most of the season, behind Hamilton, averaging double-figure points and leading in 3-point shots made. He has helped fill the void created by the early departure for the NBA of All-Big 12 point guard Tyronn Lue, a distant cousin.

The loss of Lue forced Belcher into a new role. "Tyronn was the main leader of the team last year," Belcher said. "I just kind of sat back and watched him, kind of learned a lot from him.

"Now he's gone and it was my turn, or someone else's turn, to step up. I think I've kind of filled those shoes a little bit. I think I've really matured, just handling the team the way we have, trying to keep everyone together and staying focused, has really been a key for me."

By his own admission, Belcher struggled some early in the season trying to pick up the scoring slack left by Lue. "I think we went through a period of adjusting without Tyronn," Nee said late in the season. "But I think it has given a great opportunity for players to grow up, and we're growing up.

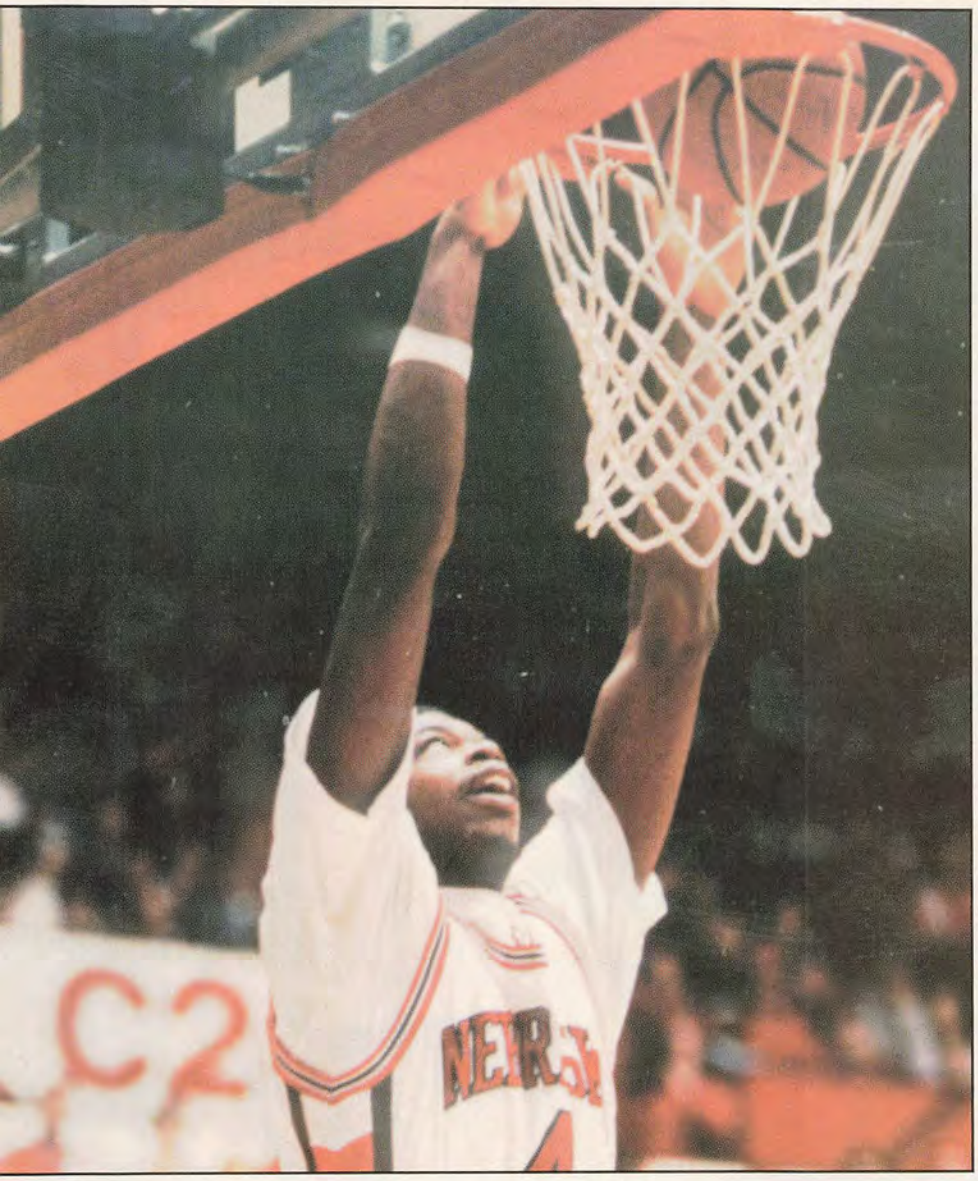
"They're really responding. And Cookie's one of them."

Hamilton has been the focus of Nebraska's success this season, justifiably so. He is only the fourth player in conference history to total 1,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 200 blocked shots during his career. The other three are Danny Manning, Wayman Tisdale and Byron Houston.

"He's in very select company," said Nee. "It's really, really special."

Without Hamilton, Belcher would have been the focus. But he doesn't consider himself as having been overlooked. "Venson, he's the key to our team," Belcher said. "I'm just trying to stay out there and be a leader, get everyone involved in the game, just start the pace on defense and go from there."

That mission has been accomplished. ■





Venson Hamilton is the second Nebraska player to be named conference player of the year

Big 12's Best

Venson Hamilton has met Andre Smith. They've talked a couple of times.

"He seemed like a mean person," Hamilton said recently with a smile. "But, you know, he told me a lot (about) how to play and stuff about rebounding, (to) be more physical and stuff. He helped me out a lot, too, just telling me some of the stuff he was doing when he was around."

Smith was around, on the Nebraska basketball team, from 1977 to 1981, when he was chosen Big Eight Conference "Player of the Year." He was the only Cornhusker to be so honored, until now. In early March, Hamilton, the Cornhuskers' senior center, was named Big 12 "Player of the Year."

The award rightfully belonged to Hamilton, according to Coach Danny Nee.

"You'd have to sit me down and explain to me why you voted for someone else, if you followed the league the whole year, because I really think he was a notch above everyone else," Nee said.

"I mean, when he hit the league (season), he hit the league running."

Hamilton, who became only the fourth player in conference history to total 1,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 200 blocked shots in his career, led the Big 12 in scoring in conference games, averaging 18.3 points. He was second in rebounding, averaging 11.0, and blocked 2.7 shots per game.

"We always thought Venson Hamilton could be a great player," said Nee.

"I think it's really special. It's hard to do, get 1,000 rebounds, 1,000 points and 200 blocked shots. I mean, you start thinking about how many you get a game. That's difficult.

"The 1,000 points, probably, out of those three things, are the easiest



Venson Hamilton demonstrates the offense (left) and defense (above) that helped him finish his Nebraska career with more than 1,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 200 blocked shots.

to get in four years, with the up-tempo (play) and the amount of games. But 1,000 rebounds and 200 blocked shots, whew!"

Hamilton shattered the Cornhusker career record for rebounding, and he needed only five blocked shots going into the Big 12 Tournament to reach that school career record.

Going into the season, "Coach said he wanted the best out of me," Hamilton said. "He said I could get there; it was just going to take work. And that's what I've done. I've put in the work.

"The first part of the season, I'd say I had an OK part of the year. But the second half, I think I played more aggressive and more intense. So that helped me a lot."

Hamilton earned the conference "Player of the Year" award from both the Associated Press and the conference coaches. He was the only unanimous selection on the AP all-conference first team. ■

Women Make It To Dance

Bubble bursts; Nebraska men settle for NIT

Dance. Dance. Dance.

"I don't want to be a wallflower. I want to dance," Paul Sanderford told the Lincoln Journal Star after learning that his Nebraska women's basketball team had received an at-large bid to the NCAA Tournament. The 21-11 Huskers, a No. 11 seed, were scheduled to play Kentucky, a No. 6 seed, in the first round of the West Region in Los Angeles. UCLA, a No. 3 seed, was a first- and second-round host.

"We are just happy to be in the tournament," said Sanderford.

The Huskers, who were making a second consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance and fifth all-time, had some doubt, after losing to Texas Tech in the semifinals of the Big 12 Tournament. Nebraska, the No. 5 seed, won in the first two rounds, defeating Texas A&M (82-71) and Texas (60-55).

The NCAA Tournament appearance also was Kentucky's fifth. The Wildcats were among a record eight teams from the Southeastern Conference to be included in the NCAA Tournament field.

Nebraska advanced to the second round of the tournament in Sanderford's first season as head coach (he came from Western Kentucky), before losing to Old Dominion.

Nebraska and Kentucky had played only one other time. The Huskers defeated the Wildcats 68-59 in the finals of last season's CableVision Classic.

Coach Danny Nee's men's team also held out some hope of making a second consecutive trip to the NCAA Tournament despite losing to Kansas 77-53 in the second round of the Big 12 Tournament. But the Cornhuskers had to settle for a bid from the National Invitation Tournament.

They were scheduled to play Nevada-Las Vegas in the first round at the Devaney Sports Center. Nebraska, considered an NCAA "bubble team," went into its 12th NIT with a 19-12 record.

The post-season tournament appearance was Nebraska's ninth in a row. Five of the nine have been in the NCAA Tournament. The Cornhuskers lost to Arkansas in the first round a year ago.

Nebraska had played UNLV in basketball only one other time before this season, losing to the Rebels 79-63 in the Rebel Roundup at Las Vegas during the 1978-79 season. ■

REBOUND

Sanderford emphasizes board work

Brooke Schwartz followed coach Paul Sanderford in front of reporters at a news conference on the day after the Nebraska women's basketball team lost to Texas 80-75 at Austin.

Before leaving the interview room at the Devaney Sports Center, Sanderford paused to ask the first question of Schwartz: "How many assists did you have, Brooke?"

The question was good-natured. The answer was none.

Schwartz groaned.

"Oh, that's history," said Sanderford, who had been emphasizing to his players the importance of putting aside the past and focusing on the immediate future. "I'm sorry."

"See. He's working on it," Schwartz said.

Actually, Sanderford had reason to be pleased with Schwartz's effort against Texas. The junior from Gering, Neb., had pulled down a career-high 15 rebounds, including nine on defense.

She led the way as the Huskers out-rebounded Texas, 45-38.

Ordinarily, Sanderford would have been pleased with such a statistic. But Nebraska had lost, and it had allowed the Longhorns 20 offensive rebounds. "The first two stats I look at every time are how many offensive rebounds did we give up and the assist-to-turnover ratio," he said.

The Huskers hadn't done well in the latter category, either.

So it was good to turn the page.

Earlier, Sanderford had discussed the correlation between rebounding and success. "You have to focus on rebounding," he said. "It's my No. 1 thing, and probably the most disappointing thing about this year's basketball team. You've got to want the ball worse than the other team.

"And we work so hard defensively, it's ridiculous to let the other team shoot the ball and us not rebound. Evidently this team does not want to focus on being a good rebounding team.

"And it will cost us before the year is out."

Sanderford was right. The Huskers were out-rebounded in seven of the next nine games, and they lost six of the seven, defeating No. 23 Kansas 82-62 despite a 40-37 rebounding deficit.



Brooke Schwartz, at 5-foot-9, is the leading rebounder.

Part of the problem might have been "we try too hard," he said.

Certainly, part of the problem has been the preparation of conference opponents.

There's no secret to Sanderford's approach. "If you talk to the coaches in the league, everybody says, well, Sanderford's team is going to rebound; they're going to go to the offensive boards; they're going to pound the boards; that's just the way they play," he said. "So I think teams are preparing for us a lot more than they ever have on the rebounding end. They're emphasizing rebounding against us."

Sanderford's offensive philosophy is based on getting the rebound and getting the ball up-court in an attempt to score in transition, before the opponent can set its defense. As a result, he has made it clear to his players that "basically, if you don't rebound, you're not going to play in our system."

"Coach is very much adamant about rebounding, and has been since the first day I met him, that if you rebound, you play," said junior center Charlie Rogers. "It doesn't matter, pretty much, any other skill you have. If you're going to go to the boards, you're going to play. I mean, there's never been any doubt in my mind that's what he wants done. At practice, it's something we work on every day."

Rebounding isn't that complicated, according to junior guard Nicole Kubik, the team's leading scorer. "To play defense and rebound you really don't need to have a lot of talent. You just have to have a lot of will to make yourself do it," she said. "Rebounding is just, if you want the ball, go get it."

The motivation is sometimes greater on offense than defense. "Offensive rebounds, everybody's going after because you can score when you rebound offensively," said Rogers.

But defensive rebounds are Sanderford's first concern.

He has used sarcasm at times to emphasize their importance, telling his players "don't worry about rebounding. Go stand under the basket and watch the lights. You know, don't bother putting a body on anybody. That's just part of the game we don't have to worry about. We're too good for that."

Sanderford "says that a lot," Schwartz said. "At the time, you're thinking: 'I crash the boards.' Or like, I have a tendency if Nicole is shooting, I'll watch the ball and just assume it's going in.

"You kind of see if the ball's going to go in or not. And if it doesn't, you know, you're kind of caught there, staring. He says that a lot, but you don't realize it until you see it on film.

"He calls you out on film. He says, 'See, you're standing right there.' And it's so true."

Sanderford hasn't had to call out Schwartz too often this season. She has been far and away the Huskers' leading rebounder. "She has to rebound," said Sanderford. "That's her game."

Even though she stands only 5-foot-9 . . . ■

RIM SHOTS

Notes And Quotes From The Basketball World

HAMILTON PASSES 1,000-REBOUND MILESTONE

For the record, Venson Hamilton's career rebound No. 1,000 came with 3:01 remaining in the Cornhuskers' 59-57 victory against Iowa State at the Devaney Sports Center.

It was more of a retrieval of a loose ball than a rebound, actually, coming after a missed shot by Cary Cochran. Hamilton grabbed two more rebounds before game's end.

"Give a shout to Vense," teammate Andy Markowski told reporters afterward.

"I don't think he realizes what kind of company he's in. That's huge."

Hamilton became only the fourth player in conference history to score 1,000 points, pull down 1,000 rebounds and block 200 shots in a career. The quiet senior from Forest City, N.C., downplayed the accomplishment, noting that it hadn't "sunk in" and probably wouldn't until later.

"My mom and dad will probably give me a call later tonight," he said. Then it would.

MARKOWSKI PLAYS AS GRAD STUDENT

Markowski graduated in December and has played his final semester at Nebraska as a graduate student, beginning work toward a master's degree in educational administration.

He is a two-time academic all-conference honoree.

Markowski also is basketball smart, as illustrated in the closing seconds of the second Iowa State game. Teammate Larry Florence missed the first of a one-and-one free throw opportunity with 9.3 seconds remaining, but Markowski managed to tip the ball out to Cookie Belcher.

Belcher was fouled with 6.1 seconds remaining and hit two free throws to ensure the victory. Without those free throws, the game would have been sent into overtime by a last-second, 3-point shot from an estimated 35 feet by Iowa State's Michael Nurse. The tip to Belcher was intentional.

"You want to be a step ahead," said Markowski. "I try to think a little bit out there."



Nebraska senior forward Andy Markowski finds time to hit the books as well as the boards.

JUNIOR COLLEGE BIG MEN COMMIT TO NEBRASKA

Kimani Ffriend, a 6-foot-11, 220-pound center from Gulf Coast, Fla., Community College and George Mazyck, a 6-9, 270-pound center from Coffeyville, Kan., Community College have orally committed to to accept scholarships from Nebraska, according to published reports.

Ffriend is a native of Jamaica. Mazyck, who began his college career at Missouri, is from Columbia, S.C. but played at Mt. Zion Christian Academy in Durham, N.C.

Cornhusker assistant Cleo Hill formerly coached at Mt. Zion.

Assuming he signs a letter of intent with the Cornhuskers in April, Ffriend would become what is believed to be the second Nebraska basketball player from Jamaica. Pete Manning, who played from 1987 to 1989, also was a Jamaica native. He graduated high school in Trenton, N.J., however.

Ffriend averaged 18.2 points, 9.5 rebounds and 5.7 blocked shots in 24 games at Gulf Coast Community College this season before being dismissed from the team, according to the Omaha World-Herald. He had transferred to Gulf Coast Community College from DeKalb, Ga., College.

Mazyck missed most of this season because of a broken kneecap.

Ffriend and Mazyck are the second and third players to indicate they will sign with the Cornhuskers in the NCAA's spring signing period (April 7-May 7). Earlier, Danny Walker, a 6-1, 195-pound point guard from Compton, Calif. Community College, announced his intention to sign with Nebraska.

Walker's teammate, 6-6, 240-pound Steffon Bradford, was among three players who signed letters of intent in November. The others were 6-9, 220-pound Kenny Booker from Mt. Zion Christian Academy and 6-11, 205-pound Brian Conklin from Hubbard, Ohio. ■

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Just Big Enough

Freshman right-hander Shane Komine gets along fine at 5-foot-8, 160 pounds

By Mike Babcock

Shane Komine takes no offense at the characterization.

"It was a laugh when I heard about that," the Nebraska freshman said, referring to a story in the student newspaper, The Daily Nebraskan, in which he was described as a "freak of nature."

"That's exactly what he is," Ken Harvey said recently.

Harvey, Komine's Cornhusker baseball teammate, meant it as a compliment. And Komine, a soft-spoken freshman pitcher from Honolulu, Hawaii, took it that way.

The basis for the description is Komine's fastball, which registers "from 88 to 91 (miles per hour)" on a radar gun, said pitching coach Rob Childress. "He's got very good mechanics and just a quick arm that allows him to throw with such great velocity and maintain it for quite a while.

"I think when guys see him walk out to the mound, it makes them feel like, well, here's a guy that's going to pitch backwards and be 78 to 80 (mph). And then they step in the box.

"The ball gets to the plate in a hurry with him."

The surprise is a function of Komine's size. He stands 5-foot-8 and weighs 160 pounds, hardly the dimensions of a strikeout pitcher. But he has made believers of his teammates, striking out 32 and walking only two in 20 innings during the fall. At the end of fall practice, "we had individual team evaluations," Childress said. "Every guy on the team and all the coaches voted him our No. 1 pitcher.

"And when we came back in January, he picked up right where he left off."

As a result, Komine, a right-hander, earned the starting assignment for the season-opener against New Mexico State at the Showdown in the Desert tournament in Phoenix in



Scott Bruhn



Shane Komine, a freshman from Honolulu, Hawaii, earned the starting nod in the season-opener against New Mexico State at the Showdown in the Desert tournament in Phoenix in early February. He was the first freshman pitcher to start an opener for Nebraska in 30 years.

"He has very good mechanics and just a quick arm that allows him to throw with such great velocity and maintain it for quite a while."

— pitching coach Rob Childress

early February.

He was the first freshman pitcher to start an opener for Nebraska in 30 years. Gene Stohs, who later earned All-America honors as an outfielder, was the starting pitcher for the 1969 opener.

Komine's start was inauspicious. He pitched 3 2/3 innings, allowing seven hits and three earned runs, while walking three and striking out three before giving way to junior Scott Fries.

But there's bound to be a period of adjustment from high school to college. And Komine seems capable of handling it. "He's a very mature young man," said Childress.

"That's one of the things that's impressed me with him, as well as with Brent (Potter, who has since been sidelined by injury) and some of our other freshmen. Steve Hale has done an outstanding job for us, and R.D. Spiehs is going to throw an awful lot for us. We're counting on some freshmen (pitchers) to have good years for us.

In addition to Komine, Hale and Spiehs, the pitchers include true freshmen Dave Schneider and Matt Hopper and redshirted freshmen Jeff Blaesing and Gregg Jones. "For us to be successful, we're going to have to have these freshmen be successful," Childress said.

Komine is something of a curiosity not only because of his fastball but also because he's from Hawaii and "didn't know if Nebraska had a baseball team until a couple of years ago," he said.

That's when Danny Kimura, a sophomore third baseman and outfielder from Iolani High School in Kailua, Hawaii, came to the mainland to be a Cornhusker. One of Komine's coaches helped get Kimura to Nebraska, and "he got me interested in coming to Nebraska," said Komine.

Komine took the initiative, introducing himself to Childress and coach Dave Van Horn during a tournament in which the Cornhuskers played in Hawaii a year ago.

The prospect of pitching in a cold-weather climate didn't deter Komine, who also was recruited by New Mexico and the University of San Francisco. "My mom's a flight attendant and we've traveled a lot, all over the world," he said. "I've experienced a lot of cold weather. I'd seen snow before."

Last summer, he pitched in Alaska, "so I knew how it would be, pretty much," he said.

Nebraska showed an interest when most major colleges didn't, probably because of his size.

"I've been small all my life," Komine said. "People have been telling me that.

"It's a real good feeling when they (batters) think I'm small, that this guy has nothing. You go out there and compete with guys who are bigger than you. It's a good feeling to get them out."

"He's gotten outs ever since he's been here," said Childress.

"I don't know where he gets it from, but the guy can throw the ball," Harvey said. ■

In Her Circle

The center of the diamond is a comfort zone for Nebraska's bionic pitcher

By Steve Sipple

She does it when nobody's around; the silence allows her to think and reflect.

Nebraska All-America pitcher Jenny Voss scales the fence surrounding the field at the NU Softball Complex in Lincoln, Neb., and heads straight for the mound and soaks in the calm.

"It feels like home out there," she said. "If I feel stressed out sometimes, I'll go out there at night and just sit on the pitcher's mound. It's the most comforting feeling."

It was the middle of last July, and Voss needed a little comfort. She was under strict orders to avoid pitching, which is like telling Aretha Franklin to avoid singing. Voss had experienced intense pain in her right (pitching) shoulder earlier in the summer while throwing in an American Softball Association tournament and was in the midst of a six-week rehabilitation program.

If Voss couldn't pitch, at least she could meditate in her private sanctuary, the circular spot where the karma is always good.

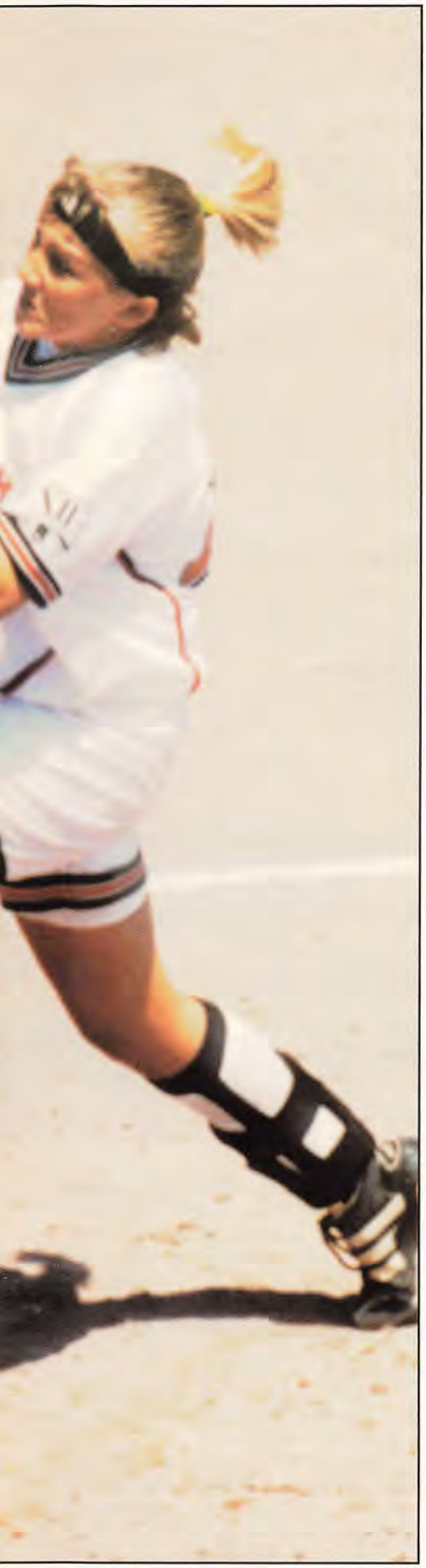
"I just wanted to go and put myself on the mound, put myself in that place, even if it meant just creating a mental picture of feeling good and being on top of my game," she said.

It's no wonder Voss finds comfort on the mound. Her success — and her endurance — have been at times mind-boggling. Last season the 5-foot-9 junior led the nation with 40 victories and became the first Nebraska pitcher to earn first-team All-America honors. The high point was a 49-inning scoreless streak that lasted the entire Big 12 Tournament and into the NCAA regional in Lincoln.

The Ankeny, Iowa, native ended the season by throwing 101 straight innings, a stretch of 14 games. She



Jenny Voss led the nation with 40 victories and became the first Nebraska pitcher to earn first-team All-America honors.



shattered school records for victories (she was 40-9), complete games (46) and innings pitched (340.1). In short, she was Nebraska's bionic woman.

In retrospect, she said, "There were days when I was tired and really could have used a break. I definitely could do it again if I had to. But I would rather go through the season and feel fresh, like my pitches were breaking and like I have speed and just feel crisp every time I have a chance to get on the mound."

It was last June, a few weeks after Nebraska's season ended with a fifth-place finish in the College World Series at Oklahoma City, and Voss was back at it, pitching in the aforementioned ASA Tournament in North Platte, Neb. She pitched two games on a Saturday and went to throw on Sunday "and it was like my arm didn't even know how to move in a circle," she said. "It was the scariest thing."

Even more frightening, Voss pitched later that day, despite the pain.

"I think I just took a whole bunch of aspirin," she recalls.

Voss returned to Lincoln and visited the Nebraska medical staff. Nebraska Coach Rhonda Revelle was notified. Voss faced six weeks of rehabilitation. If rehab failed, surgery loomed. "There was no way I was going to let it get to that point," Voss said.

The first couple weeks of rehab consisted of treatment to reduce swelling and pain. Soon Voss would perform back and shoulder exercises with one-pound weights in each hand. She could barely complete a set of 10 repetitions.

Here was the Huskers' bionic pitcher, struggling with one-pound weights.

"It was really scary," she said. "I kept asking my therapist, 'Is this going to get better?' "

Soon Voss moved up to 10-pound weights. Then she started throwing; 20 pitches at first. By the end of the summer, she was nearly back to normal.

At the start of fall practice in September, Voss said, the pain returned "a little bit." The Nebraska coaches limited her pitch count and decided to grant her one "test game" in the Huskers' first fall tournament. If pain persisted, they said, she would stop cold turkey for six weeks. She warmed up before the big test and felt fine and thought "just go for it."

Voss went for it, all right, tossing a no-hitter against Colorado State at Fort Collins, Colo. From that point, she was allowed to pitch one game in every tournament the rest of the fall season.

There would be one more crisis before practice started in January. Voss and teammate Ginger Taylor visited Taylor's parents over Christmas break in Wichita Falls, Texas. They started their return trip on the day of an ice storm and were only a couple miles from Taylor's home, driving about 30 mph in Taylor's Ford Explorer, when the vehicle hit a patch of ice and started spinning toward the shoulder of the road.

The vehicle rolled several times before stopping in an upside-down position. Taylor's parents were following in another vehicle, watching the scene in horror. We take time out for a public-service announcement: Both Taylor and Voss were hanging by their seatbelts when the vehicle stopped rolling. Without the seatbelts . . . well, let's just say a sore shoulder seems a little minor at moments like these.

"Things were just flying out of the windows — CD players and some of our luggage," Voss recalls. "(Taylor's parents) said they were just waiting for our bodies to fly out."

Neither player was seriously injured, though Voss suffered a concussion and sore back, from which she has obviously recovered in full. In Nebraska's season-opening tournament, in Tempe, Ariz., in February, Voss recorded complete-game victories against Maryland, UNLV and No. 21 Florida State. She struck out 15 in 19 innings and held batters to a collective .167 average.

Nebraska pitching coach Lori Sippel said she hopes Voss won't have to put up the numbers she did last season. Sippel has confidence that sophomore left-hander Lori Tschannen and freshman righty Leigh Ann Walker can lighten Voss' load. "If we're going to go farther this season, we'll need all three pitchers," Sippel said.

Voss admits she shows workaholic tendencies. "That's a very good way to put it," she says, when told she almost seems addicted to her craft. But Voss cuts back on her pitch count in practice these days. She listens more closely to her body.

"It's not like I'm slacking by any means," she said. "Pitching is just something I love to do, the mound is somewhere I love to be." ■

Over The Top

Nebraska's six-time All-America high jumper hopes Olympics are more than a dream

By Mark Derowitsch

At halftime of a recent Nebraska men's basketball game, an average looking student climbed out of the stands, picked up a ball , went out on the Bob Devaney Sports Center floor and treated the crowd to a two-handed, reverse slam.

And yes, he was wearing street clothes.

It wasn't just any average student, though. In fact, it would be an insult to call him an average big-time college athlete.

It was just Shane Lavy, who's better known for leaping tall high jump bars in a single bound.

Lavy plays basketball as often as he can, but his specialty is track and field, specifically the high jump. He's considered one of the top high jumpers in the college ranks and has been since he arrived at Nebraska from the tiny town of Glasco, Kan., four years ago.

He's good enough to dream Olympic dreams.

"I'll take this as far as I can," said Lavy, a senior who has won six All-America awards in the high jump as a Husker. "If I could, I'd take it to my grave. That's just not practical. I'm hoping to make an Olympic team one time, and I think I can. When it comes to big meets, I've done pretty well. I seem to pull something together when it counts."

That's why Lavy has no plans to abandon his athletic career when his eligibility expires at Nebraska this spring. He figures he still has at least five years before he reaches his peak.

Right now, Lavy's plans include staying in Lincoln to train with the Nebraska jumpers under coach Gary Pepin and find a job so he can finance his dreams.

"You can't make a living in track and field," he said.

Despite his ability to perform well when the most is at stake, Lavy failed to win the event at the Big 12 Conference Indoor Track and Field Championships February 19-20 in Manhattan, Kan. Lavy cleared the bar at 7 feet, 3 inches to place second. Mark Boswell of Texas won by jumping 7-4 on his final attempt of the competition.



Lavy had hoped to do better.

"I felt pretty good today; I was looking to go a lot higher," he said. "I have some technical problems I have to work on. That was my problem today."

He didn't show any disappointment with his runner-up Big 12 finish, but then again Lavy has been through it before.

When he was younger, he used



Shane Lavy, a senior from tiny Glasco, Kan., holds the Nebraska outdoor record in the high jump with his personal-best leap of 7-foot-5 3/4.

to let the extracurricular activity surrounding the competitions bother him.

Not any more.

"I'm really laid back," he said. "A lot of really good athletes get nervous when the big meets come around or worry about what people are saying about them, all the hype. My freshman year, I let that stuff bug me. After that, I learned to sit back and focus on consistency."

Lavy has been a model of consistency at Nebraska. During his first three seasons as a Husker, Lavy has jumped at least 7-5. He holds the Husker outdoor record in the high jump with his personal-best leap of 7-5 3/4.

About the only thing he hasn't accomplished is an NCAA crown. The closest he's come is a third-place finish during the 1998 NCAA indoor meet and the 1997 outdoor event.

But, during his first three seasons as a Husker, Lavy advanced to both the indoor and outdoor national meets each time and placed in the top six five times.

In the 1999 indoor meet March 5-6 at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis, Ind., Lavy finished sixth. He added his fourth indoor All-America honor and his sixth overall.

Whether or not Lavy ever claims a title, Pepin is convinced that he'll be in the hunt, vying for a national championship.

"He's a real gamer," Pepin said. "The bigger the stakes, the bigger the competition. Shane is the guy who responds to that real well." ■

Top 15

By James Hale

The dust from the college football recruiting season has settled, and there are differences of opinion on who's the best.

Opinions are like noses . . . everybody has one, so here is one. Remember, recruiting is an inexact science, and so is rating the nation's top classes.

1 TEXAS: The question is not who the Longhorns signed, it's who didn't they sign. Start with the nation's top offensive player in quarterback Chris Simms of Franklin Lakes Ramapo, N.J., and the nation's top defensive player in defensive end Corey Redding of Galena Park (North Shore), Texas, and a total of the six in the top 20 in Texas. Realize that is only the tip of the iceberg for the Longhorns, who pulled off a monster class.

2 OHIO STATE: John Cooper loses so many underclassman to the NFL draft every year that he has to go out and put together great recruiting classes to continue to play among the nation's elite. Nationally ranked running backs Kelton Lindsey of Lebanon, Ohio, and Jesse Kline of Upper Arlington, Ohio, restock the Buckeyes' ground game. All-American Linebacker Fred Pagac Jr. of Dublin Coffman, Ohio , will supply the defense.

3 MICHIGAN: To play in the Big 10 you have to control the ball on the ground, which means you have to dominate up front. Michigan signed two of the top 10 offensive linemen in the country in Demetrius Soloman of Flint (Northern), Mich., and Tony Pape of Hinsdale (South), Ill. All-American running back Brent Cummings of Belding, Mich., will run behind all that beef. All-American quarterback Andy Mignery of Hamilton, Ohio, is set to be the next great Wolverine signal caller.

Nebraska didn't make the top 15 this year, but most "experts" ranked the Huskers somewhere from 16-20. This writer ranked them 20th but expects it will turn out to be another winning recruiting class in the long run.

4 ALABAMA: The Crimson Tide pulled in the best group in the SEC. All-American Hirchel Bolden of Dothan, Ala., is the best wide receiver to sign with the Tide in years. Santonio Beard of Nashville (Pearl-Chon), Tenn., shunned the national champion Vols to sign with the Tide. Alabama always seems to sign All-American offensive linemen, and this year, Alonzo Ephraim of Birmingham (Wenonah), Ala., and Matt Lomax of Mobile, Ala., are highly regarded.

5 TEXAS A&M: You don't think A&M would let Texas have all the recruiting fun do you? All-American quarterback Colby Freeman of Brownwood, Texas, brings an option flavor to the Aggies. Ty Warren of Bryan, Texas , is a franchise defensive tackle prospect, and linebacker Jason Frederick of Houston (Cy-Falls) may be the fastest at his position in the country. Sean Weston of Gardena Serra, Calif., and Sam Davis of Humble, Texas, are future pros in the secondary.

6 NOTRE DAME: It was a typical year in recruiting for the Fighting Irish, as they branched out all over the country signing All-American talent. All-American OL Jeff Faine chose the Irish over Nebraska late. Notre Dame also cleaned up in Texas, with standouts Gerome Sapp, a defensive back from Houston (Lamar) and defensive end Cedric Hilliard of Arlington (Lamar). The Fighting Irish even signed the top kicker in the country in Nick Setta of Lockport (TWP), Ill.

7 UCLA: The Bruins are all the way back. J.P. Losman of Venice, Calif., is regarded as one of the top five quarterbacks in the country. He will throw to one of the top tight ends in Mike Seidman of Westlake, Calif., and All-American wide receiver Jerry Owens of Newhall, Calif. Shane Lehmann of Corona, Calif., and Bryce Bohlander of Salem, Ore., are two of the top ten offensive linemen in the country. Linebacker Marcus Reese of San Jose (Oak Grove), California is one of the top five in the country.

8 FLORIDA: The Gators always get a franchise quarterback, and this year it is Rex Grossman of Bloomington (South), Ind. He will throw to All-American wide receivers Keiwan Ratliff of Whitehall, Ohio, and Elgin Hicks of Punta Gorda (Charlotte), Fla. The Gators always play great defense and they signed the top DB in the country in Lito Sheppard of Jacksonville (Raines), Fla.

9 LSU: The Bengal Tigers scored big in the secondary with Domanick Davis of Breaux Bridge, La., and Demetrius Hoofkin of Kentwood, La. Walter Young of Purvis, Miss., is a blue chip defensive line prospect. Eric Edwards of Monroe (Ouachita Christian), La., may be the nation's top tight end prospect. Sean Milligan of Norcross, Ga., is a top offensive line prospect.

10 GEORGIA: Jim Donnan continues his rebuilding effort of the Dawgs' program by signing All-American quarterback Damien Gary of Athens (Clarke Central), Ga. He will throw to the top WR prospect in the country in Reggie Brown of Carrollton, Ga., and All-American tight end Jason Rader of St. Albans, W.Va. Kevin Breedlove of Clemson (Daniel), S.C., is one of the top offensive linemen in the country.

11 MIAMI: The Hurricanes believe they have found a Michael Irvin clone in Andre Johnson of Miami (Senior), rated as one of the top three receivers in the country. Vernon Carey of Northwestern, Fla., is rated the No. 1 offensive lineman in the country and committed early to the Hurricanes. Maurice Sikes of Miami (Pace) is an All-American cover corner.

12 NORTH CAROLINA: The Tar Heels are getting ready to defend against the pass by signing All-American defensive backs Michael Waddle of Ellerbe (Richmond Senior), N.C., and Derrick Johnson of Greenbelt, Md. Daniel Davis of Stafford (Brooke Point), Va., is one of the top 10 running backs in the country. Sam Aiken of Everett (James Kenan), N.C., is one of the top wide receivers in the country.

13 TENNESSEE: The Vols lost out on Simms at the last minute but are happy with quarterback T.J. Suggs out of Georgia. He will throw to a great one in Durrel Robinson of Duncan (Byrnes), S.C. The Vols also landed the best pure center in the country in Greg Barnum of Killeen (Ellison), Texas, and landed another All-American from the Lone Star state in DB Sterling Kazee of Irving (MacArthur), Texas. Tennessee also boasts one of the top 10 defensive tackle prospects in Albert Haynesworth of Hartsville (Dematha Catholic), Md.

14 USC: The Trojans are reloading with All-American Bernard Riley of Los Alamitos, Calif., leading the way. He's rated as one of the top five defensive tackles in the country. While Riley is taking care of things up front, Darrell Rideaux of Long Beach, Calif., will patrol in the secondary. The Trojans always have an all-world offensive tackle on their roster, and the next great one will be Lenny Vandermade of Santa Ana (Mater Dei), Calif.

15 FLORIDA STATE: The Seminoles land in the top 15, even though they could only sign 12 players this year. It may be the best group of 12 in the country. Nick Maddox of Kannapolis (All Brown), N.C., is the top running back in the country. Fabian Walker of Americus, Ga., is a tremendous athlete at quarterback. Darnell Dockett of Burtonsville (Pain Branch), Md., is one of the top three defensive tackles in the country. Rufus Brown of El Paso (Austin), Texas, is one of the best pure athletes who will line up in the secondary. ■



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A Kinder, Gentler Nee?

Early season 'Wisconsin massacre' proves to be a learning experience



Mike BABCOCK

THE GAME is a fading memory, little more than an unpleasant footnote to the Nebraska men's basketball season. Out of sight (it was played in Fairbanks, Alaska, after all), out of mind.

It didn't even have the distinction of being the most lopsided loss in Danny Nee's 13 seasons as Cornhusker head coach. There have been three greater deficits: at Oklahoma (105-64) in 1990, at Oklahoma State (93-53) in 1995 and at Iowa State (114-76) in 1988.

The Nevertheless, Nee refers to it as the "Wisconsin massacre."

The Badgers defeated Nebraska 78-41 in the second round of the losers' bracket at the Top of the World Classic in late November. And Nee used every player who made the trip.

"Very simply, there was no one going to get on the plane leaving Fairbanks, thinking he wasn't part of this," Nee said at a late-season news conference, recalling the Alaskan debacle.

"I wanted to open a can of what do you call it? Whoop-ass?"

That's what the World Wrestling Federation's Stone Cold Steve Austin calls it.

Whatever. "We had to open about five cans. And we shared it," Nee said. "I wanted the coaches, from the head coach right down to the manager, to understand what this is about.

"And I thought the lesson was well-learned."

In that sense, the "Wisconsin massacre" was a turning point this season, demonstrating that no one could shirk responsibility, that without team unity there was no hope for success.

It wasn't THE turning point because some difficult times followed. Nebraska would lose five of its next 11 games, including the first two in conference play, before the season turned around.

Attendance at the Devaney Sports Center was on the decline, a fact duly noted by the Lincoln and Omaha newspapers. Apathy was considered a significant contributing factor. Nee's detractors, however, were far from apathetic. The door was open. And they were eager to push him out.

Senior Andy Markowski, who enthusiastically predicted success for his final Cornhusker team, was perplexed by an 8-7 start. "Sometimes I questioned what was going wrong," he said.

"Why weren't we playing well? I thought we had the talent. I thought we had the team unity. We had character. We had, from top to bottom, role players. We had Venson (Hamilton).

"But after the loss to Texas, you're kind of like: Man, what's going on here?"

The 89-76 Texas loss at the Sports Center, before a modest crowd of 8,143, followed an unexpectedly lopsided, 80-57 conference-opening loss against Missouri at Columbia.

"If we would have lost a couple of more games, I would have been doubting if we could have gotten the run going," said Markowski. "But it's my senior season, so I never gave up on it."

And neither did anyone else, including a kinder, gentler Nee.

OK. Maybe Nee hasn't lost that characteristic intensity. He's as competitive as ever. "Don't let him fool you," said junior Cookie Belcher. "He's still that way. He just keeps it behind closed doors.

"He'll get in your face, (but) not as bad during the games. He usually waits until after practice and then he'll tell you about it. Or right before practice he'll get on you, tell you what you're doing wrong. He'll bring you in individually and talk to you. He's still the same old Coach Nee."



Danny Nee says he has changed.

Not quite, says the 53-year-old Nee. He has changed this season.

"The one thing I've learned, I wasn't going to do any self-destructive behavior. I wasn't going to stand in the way of players growing," he said. "I wasn't going to stand in the way of the press picking on me. I was not going to let those things distract me from what we were trying to do.

"So I thought my behavior, even in the pressure situations, was not self-destructive. I was always looking for a ray of sunlight, a positiveness on it. And we just stayed with it.

"I don't get in people's faces anymore. I think that's a non-productive way of coaching. It's just non-productive, and I'm not interested in anything that's not productive."

There was a time when the experience in Alaska, which also included a 75-60 loss against Villanova in the opening round, might have been sufficient to set off Nee.

But he depended on the experience carrying its own message.

Nee wasn't completely passive afterward. "He kind of told us that if we didn't start playing well, then our season would go down the drain, just like everyone expected," Belcher said.

Large and enthusiastic crowds have returned to the Sports Center, to support Nee as well as his players. He has changed, according to Markowski, though not necessarily in a way fans can see.

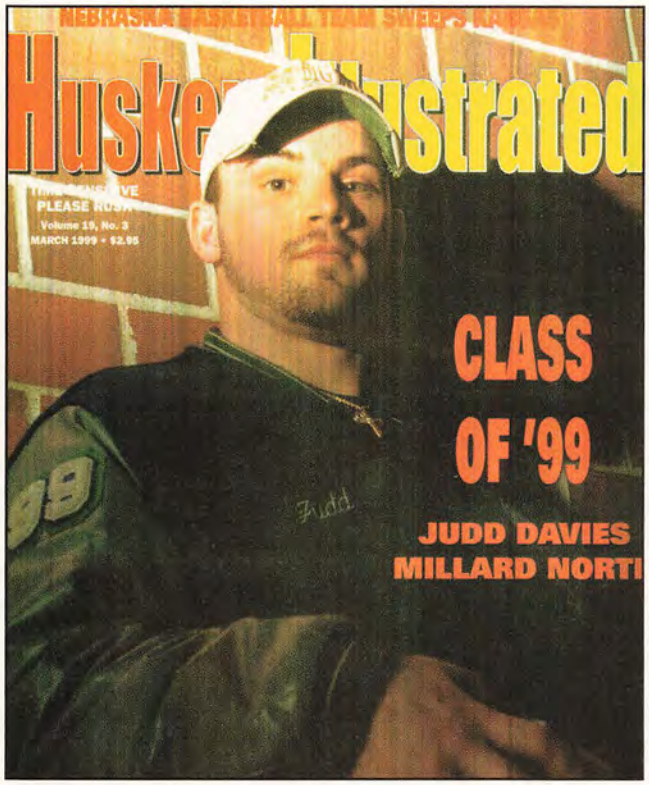
"I've been here five years, so I want to think I know Coach Nee pretty well," said Markowski. "When I first got here, it was: This is the way. Each player had to be handled this way."

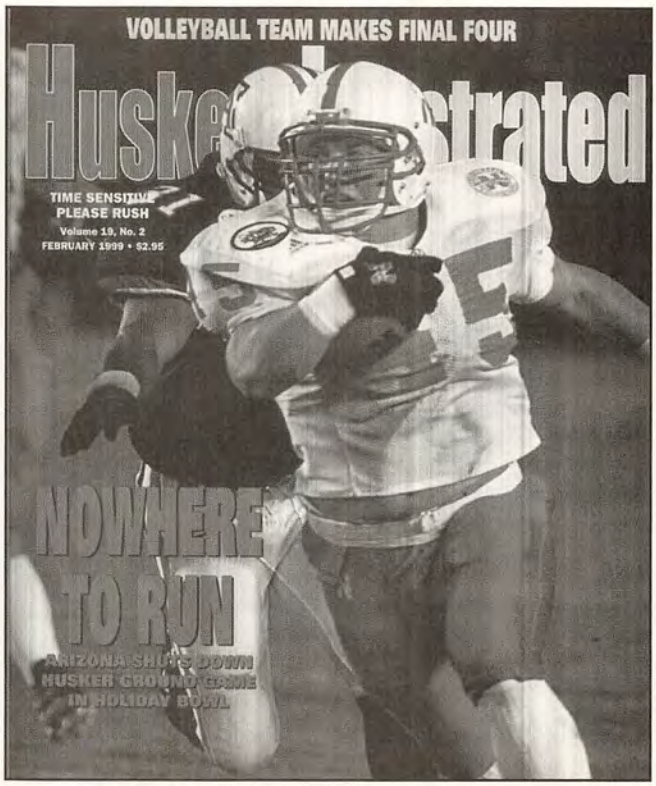
Now, Nee handles each player differently. He's more vocal with some.

"I think in my five years, it's been the best job he's done," Markowski said. "I mean, it's been extraordinary how he's pulled us together and made a unit."

And the "Wisconsin massacre" was a big step in that. ■

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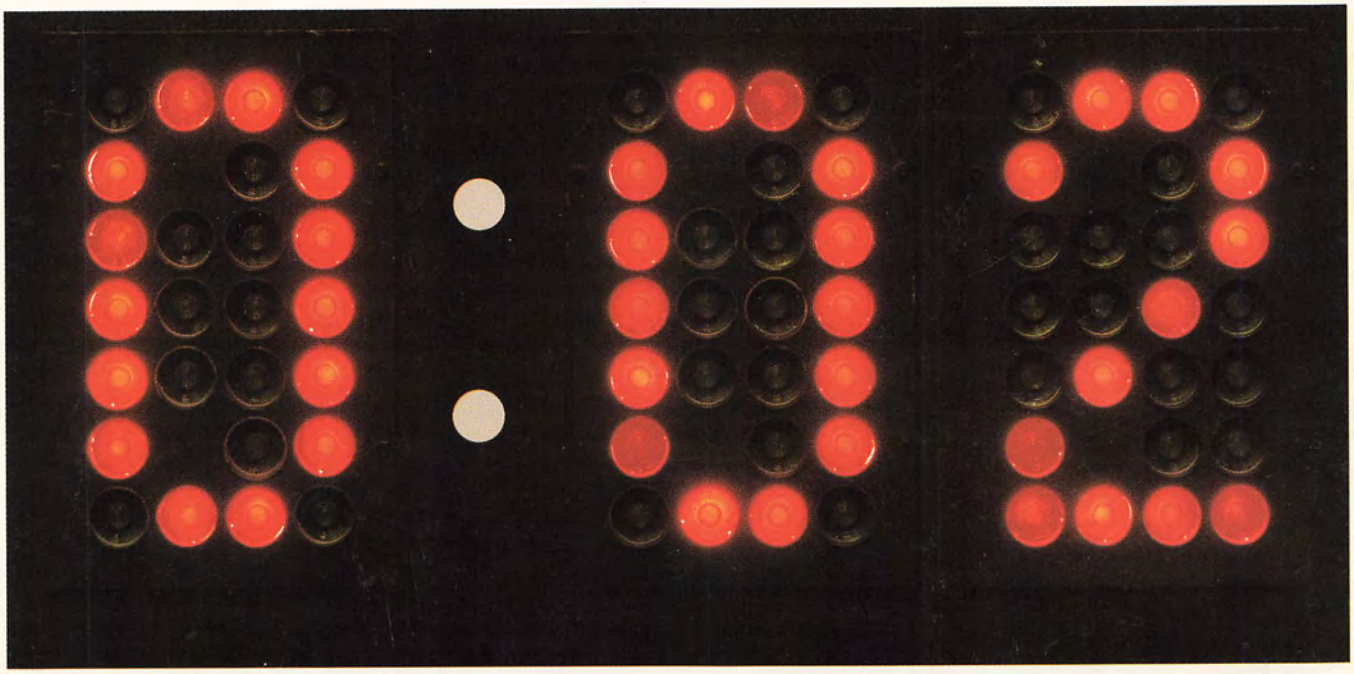
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